

# Smooth Sailing *on* Stormy Seas



**Sharon S. Laird**, Director of Bands, retired  
Oak Grove High School, Hattiesburg, Mississippi

**Mark W. Laird**, Director of Bands, retired  
West Jones High School, Laurel, Mississippi

# **“Smooth Sailing on Stormy Seas”**

*Practical Suggestions and Strategies for a Long, Happy and Successful Career*

Recent studies show that the average career span of a teacher in today's educational environment is only 5 years and the average career span of a band director is only 4½ years. Why do so many promising teachers leave our field after only a few short years? This clinic is designed to help Band Directors, both young and old, avoid many of the common challenges encountered during their career. Clinic attendees will gain a “real-world” working knowledge of skills and strategies that will assist them in meeting those challenges while developing a high quality program and avoiding burn-out. All of the suggestions and strategies presented come from the clinicians' combined 75 years of teaching experience.

This clinic began as a handout that I would give to my student teachers because I realized that student teachers were coming out of college well prepared on their instrument and in knowledge of subject area, but were unprepared to function every day in the school setting and in the band class environment. They were not being taught how to manage their classrooms and paperwork, how interact with parents, teachers, and principals, how to run a band booster organization, how to make music selections, etc. Because of degree requirements, this was not necessarily the fault of the universities. In order to help prepare these future band directors to have a successful career, I began putting together some useful advice in a handout for them, and it has grown into this clinic presentation. It is our hope that the information presented during this clinic session and contained in this handout will be helpful to young as well as experienced band directors. After all, none of us have all of the answers and we should be constantly seeking advice. All of the information came from our personal experiences or those of our mentors. It is our hope that you will use this information to enhance your teaching and your career. We use these strategies in our everyday teaching, and they work for us. All of these suggestions will not work for everyone in every situation, but using these strategies will make your career smoother and easier over the long run. It takes a long time with continuous hard work to master the art of band directing, and just when you think you've seen it all, something unexpected comes at you. Using these strategies will help minimize these unexpected situations.

*Sharon Laird*  
601-516-0120  
msbd111@aol.com

*Mark Laird*  
601-516-0062  
aimsummercamp@aol.com

# SMOOTH SAILING on STORMY SEAS

---

## Practical Suggestions and Strategies for a Long, Happy, and Successful Career

---

### *Dealing with School Personnel*

#### Who to get to know

- Get to know and be nice to the custodians, maintenance man, bookkeeper, and secretaries. If they like you they will help get things done for you.
- Get to know other teachers in the school. They can help with many things and give you background info on students, parents, families, teachers, school, and the community.
- Get involved with other school activities: go to games, plays, choir and other performances. Show that you are interested in other aspects of the total school. At the least, ask students about their other activities and talk with them about it. Show genuine interest!

#### Principals

- Keep the Principals informed about your goals for the program and all of your activities. They like to know what is going on even if they don't attend all events. You also want them to know how involved you and your program are in the school and community and how much the band does. Don't assume they know all that you do – tell them!
- Stop in and visit with the Principals from time to time, even if it is just to say “Hi.” You don't want them to see you only when you have a problem or need something. Talk with them about hobbies, interests, or other small talk occasionally. Let them know you are a real person that has some other interests.
- Try to keep parent and student conflicts/problems out of the principal's office by dealing with them on your own. Administrators deal with enough upset parents during the course of a school year already. They will look favorably upon you and your program if they don't have parents in their office or phone calls complaining about you or your program.
- Contact parents when you make a disciplinary decision involving their child – don't wait for the child to go home and tell the parent their side of the story. This will probably lead to a call to the principal.

#### School Calendar

- Put events on the school calendar as early as possible (preferably at the beginning of the year) because it fills up fast. The end of the year is especially busy because of testing. Always coordinate with coaches and choir directors.
- You may still have to adjust your dates because of other activities – work with others and be flexible to a point.

## School Business

- Procedures you must find out immediately and follow: field trip requests, bus requests, travel permission forms, medical forms, drug testing forms (if your school does this), money collections/turn in, purchasing and purchase orders, discipline forms/procedures, facility repairs. **ALWAYS turn things in on time!**
- If at all possible, never handle money. If you have to, always write a receipt when you collect money and don't put it away thinking that you'll do it later. Follow your school's procedures!
- Students out of classes - Take band students out of other teachers' classes as little as possible – never would be better but that is not the real world. Also try to let the other teachers know this is your policy and don't allow them to take students out of your class (unless your school rules are different), be understanding though. If a student fails English because you wouldn't let him go finish a test in English during your class time, you may not be able to use him in band anyway. Most schools have a "No Pass, No Play" rule of some type.
- Fixed Assets/Inventory – You must keep up with the instruments & equipment owned by the school & band program. Make a list of all instruments & equipment and their serial numbers. Devise a check-out system to help you know where everything is at all times. You may want to take pictures of each and save it on a computer with the serial number and fixed asset number.
- Don't wait until the last minute – don't put things off! (forms, phone contacts, emails).

## ***Band Parent Organizations***

**It is a necessary evil, so  
make sure they are active.**

- You will probably have to guide them in the right direction. Make sure they know and understand your goals and direction for the band program. What are your goals for the band program? (festival vs. competition band, indoor programs, projected numbers over the next few years, out of state travel prospects, etc.)
- Don't let them meet without you present!
- Guide the nomination committee to help select parents for officer positions that you know can do the job the way you want and who are supportive of your goals for the program.
- Have the President/Executive Board set up committees to get the work done. Get as many involved as you can. Most people won't volunteer, but they will help if you call them with a specific task that needs done (if they are available).
- It should be in the constitution and by-laws that the Band Director is the final word on, and has veto authority over all decisions of the organization. All functions of the Band Parents Organization must proceed only with the approval of the Band Director. After all, you are ultimately responsible for what happens with the band program.

## Money

- You must have complete control of all spending, but that doesn't mean you just buy things as you need or want them.
- Always have a justification for the things you need to purchase – how will it help the program and the students.
- Be aware of the account balance at all times and make sure you get regular (at least quarterly) financial statements.
- The main function of the Band Booster Organization is raising money. Make sure the organization is always planning far in advance on their fund raising projects. Get these projects on the school calendar so there are no conflicts.
- There should be a parent or committee in charge of each fund raising project whose responsibility is to organize all aspects of the project. The burden and extra work of fund raising projects should not be the Band Director's responsibility.

## Budget

- Give the Organization a yearly budget and include all of your purchasing needs for the year (instruments, equipment, uniforms, color guard, show props, music, drill, instructors, travel, conferences/clinics, festival fees, etc.).
- Include all needs even those you intend to purchase with other funds (district, school, grants, etc) and indicate in your budget the funds that will be used to fund each item. This will let the parents know you are using all funds available not just "their" funds. It will also give them a goal to reach in their fund raising efforts.
- It is a good idea to have the organization put away a set amount each year in a savings account so that there will be funds in the future for large purchases.

# **Music Selections, Concerts, Performances**

## **Music Selections**

- ✓ Select music that has educational value for your students. What will the students learn from preparing your selections? This is difficult for smaller programs with grades 7 – 12 or 8 – 12 in the band but it can be done.
- ✓ Select music for concerts and festivals that best fits your band’s ability, instrumentation, and strengths.
- ✓ Be prepared to re-write parts as needed to get all of the parts/voices covered and balanced, or to simplify some parts for younger students. You may also need to transpose parts for other instruments to get that part played or just for balance.
- ✓ Halftime shows - select shows that will be interesting and entertaining for your audience yet still educational for the students – your audience has to hear it for 10 + weeks and the students have to rehearse it for 3 - 4 months. After all, the audience is who you will be asking for support during the year through fund raising, so keep them happy and entertained. Also select music and drill that will challenge the students yet be within their ability.
- ✓ Stands tunes:
  - 1) Select and or write, arrange, or edit a wide variety of stands tunes to play at games – something for everyone.
  - 2) Keep them short (15 – 30 seconds) so you can play them at any time during the game and can play a lot of different tunes. This will allow you to spend less rehearsal time yet give you more tunes to play. There is not much opportunity to play full length (1:30 – 2:00 minute) songs during a football game.

## **Concerts/Contests**

- ✓ Make concerts fun and entertaining yet still performed up to your standards. Concerts don’t have to be filled with all “serious” selections!
- ✓ Try to keep your concerts to an hour or less. This will assure larger crowds in the future and the students will enjoy performing concerts.
- ✓ Consider a “Prizm” Concert. Use smaller groups or even soloists on your concerts and have them perform during set changes. Students and parents will enjoy the change and will get to hear the more talented students in your program. Let the Color Guard perform on stage at the Christmas/Winter Concert and/or the Spring Concert. Also let the Drumline or Percussion Ensemble perform at concerts. Use the Marching Band on stage at the Spring Concert - playing and marching (Indoor Marching Band).
- ✓ Work to refine performances. Correct rhythms and notes are everyone’s expectation for a band performance so you need to go beyond this. *The small details are important!*
- ✓ It is your responsibility as the students’ teacher to make sure they understand how to handle ratings and competitions. Ratings and placements are only the result of a few peoples’ subjective opinion of the band’s performance on that one day at that specific time. Sometimes they make mistakes – they are only human. Your students will handle this the way you do.

## **Build Your Band’s Reputation**

- ✓ Don’t forget about the image and reputation you can build by doing other performances: nursing homes, parades, local events/festivals, around school campus, at the elementary or junior high, etc.
- ✓ Could the band play at the home basketball games? - If it is not already a part of the performance schedule at your school, you will at some time be asked to play at basketball games, etc. You will have to decide if it will benefit your program and not put undue performance requirements on your students.
- ✓ Say “Yes” when you can! You will be asked for “favors” occasionally from administration, teachers, community members, etc. Saying “yes” will go a long way towards building your bands reputation.
- ✓ Plan ahead! You know who is graduating when and what your instrumentation needs will be in the future. Also, plan for growth.
- ✓ This too (two) shall pass. Some of the wisest advice ever given to me by a mentor.
- ✓ Do not post negative comments of any kind on social media. If you do post comments on social media, they should only be positive comments.

# ***Beginning Band***

- You must guide the students in their instrument selection, don't just allow them to play what they like. Using physical characteristics (jaw, teeth, lips) and a try-out process (where they actually try to make a sound on each instrument) tell/show them and their parents what they will probably be most successful on and which instruments will allow the band to be most successful. You want to assure a quality band experience for your students as well as help them become a successful musician on an instrument.
- How far you get in the book during the first year is not as important as fundamentals. Make sure your students have and use the correct fundamentals at all times: posture, hand position, embouchure, horn position, horn angle, and **TONE QUALITY!**
- Don't just tell them once. Tell them many times each day – REINFORCE OFTEN!
- Establish procedures (routines) for everything and make sure the students follow them religiously.
- Music is for everyone, but band is not for everyone.

## ***STORMY SEAS*** ***Dealing with Students*** ***and their Parents***

### **Expectations for Your Students**

- Thoughtfully put together your expectations for your students. Post them in the classroom, hand them out to the students, and go over them.
- Send them home and have the parents sign-off on them. This may come in handy later on for that student that refuses to follow rules.
- Emphasize and review the expectations often (weekly or even daily) to make sure all of the students understand.
- Always relate back to your expectations when correcting students. Ask students often how their action or behavior is helping to prepare the band for Concert/Festival/Competition.
- Band Handbooks – have parents and students sign-off on them. This signed form could become very useful later in the year for that uncooperative student or parent.
- During rehearsals be positive as much as possible yet still make the necessary corrections to get the music performed as you want it. We get so used to correcting the mistakes and problems in rehearsals that we often times forget to tell students when they are doing something well. *Praise first, then correct.*
- When holding after school rehearsals, always end promptly on time. After all, you expect the students to be on time for rehearsals. Parents will eventually get the message and usually (not always) pick up their child on time.

### **Student Interactions**

- Don't text students or talk with students on your cell or personal phone. Only communicate with students through class, notes home, or use the school email server. You will always have witnesses or a written record. "Remind" app or similar apps are a great way to communicate.
- Never put students in your personal vehicle for any reason!
- When you have to wait with students after rehearsals for their parents to pick them up, make sure there is another adult (of the opposite sex if possible) present with you. Never put yourself in a position where you are left alone with a student.
- Do not have students as friends on your social media!
-

## Parent Interactions

- Be careful of friendships with parents. Be friendly but not close friends.
- Always promptly return phone calls and emails.
- Handling parent conferences/confrontations
  - 1) Be Pro-active! Call or email a parent when you notice a problem first developing; a student's change in attitude, work ethic, behavior, circle of friends, etc. Don't wait for the problem to become a serious issue.
  - 2) If you have to have a conference with an angry and/or irate parent, always schedule it with an administrator present. Make sure the administrator knows the background on the situation prior to the conference.
  - 3) If a parent tries to confront you at an after school event, politely tell them that you understand that they are upset and you want to talk with them about it, but your responsibility at the moment is the students. You will be glad to meet with them tomorrow in the principal's office, and then walk away before things escalate. This may not always be possible!
  - 4) During a conference, get on the parents side and they'll get on your side. Use statements such as: "I agree with just about everything you said" or "I understand how you feel" or "I have a teenager at home" or "parent to parent." Most parents just want to vent their frustrations and be heard.
- Don't give out your cell number or personal phone number to parents unless you absolutely have to.
  - 1) Make sure parents understand that they can call you about school/band issues at the school during school hours.
  - 2) If they do call your cell number, use caller ID to screen them or let them leave a voicemail. Then you can decide whether it is important enough to call them back.
  - 3) If parents text you, you can decide whether it is important enough to call or text them back.
  - 4) Communicate with parents through notes home, newsletters, Remind (or similar apps), or emails.

## ***ENJOYING THE VOYAGE*** ***Your Career***

### Dress Professionally

- ❖ Especially when at Clinics, Conferences and Festivals/Competitions. You are representing your profession, your school, and your band program.
- ❖ Appropriate dress for Concert Festivals: Males should wear a dark suit or tux, Females should wear a dark suit or long black dress. For concerts, dress similar to festival attire but it will depend on student dress, it can be a little more casual.
- ❖ Dress for Marching Festivals/Competitions: a staff polo and khakis is appropriate, but it could be a shirt and tie or suit for males or a business suit for females.
- ❖ Invest in good quality shoes. You will be on your feet a majority of each day.

### Traditions vs. Changes

- ❖ You will probably want to make a lot of changes in your new program right away, but don't make too many changes all at once. You win the war one battle at a time.
- ❖ Traditions are important to students and parents and some traditions are too sacred to change right away. Some things you can live with for a year or 2 before changing. All traditions can be changed eventually if replaced with other traditions.

### When is it Time to Move On?

- ❖ There may be a job/school where you just won't fit in with the parents, students, administrators no matter how hard you try. Give it 2 to 3 years and then evaluate the goals you set for the program. Is there any evidence of progress? Is it worth staying to try to achieve these goals?
- ❖ Most principals understand that coaches, band directors, and choral directors don't always find the correct fit within their school and may need to change jobs after 2 – 3 years. Make sure you have been keeping the administration informed about the goals you set and the progress made towards these goals.

## Advice/Help

- ❖ Find a Mentor – a successful, experienced Band Director in the area. Talk with him/her often. Share problems and ask for advice. Question him/her about anything you can think of about your career, band, school, rehearsals, instruments, intonation, embouchure, tone, balance etc.
- ❖ Ask other successful musicians to come listen to your rehearsals and offer their advice. You will learn more from this than anything else you do. Use other Band Directors (active or retired) and college faculty (if there is a college close by).
- ❖ Don't Make Excuses! Size doesn't matter. "I have a small band." "My band is young." "I'm using 7<sup>th</sup> and/or 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the HS band." JUST TEACH!
- ❖ Don't ask for advice from people who will tell you what they think you want to hear (a feel good person). You want advice from people who will be honest and tell you like they hear/see it.

## ***TAKE CARE OF THE CAPTAIN*** ***Your Personal Life***

### Make Time for a Personal Life

- ✓ Spend time with your family – they are the most important people in your life!
- ✓ Find a hobby or activity and make time for it on a regular basis.
- ✓ Extra rehearsals - For the most part, it is not how much time you rehearse your band, rather it is how much rehearsing you do in the time you have. Create an efficient and effective rehearsal procedure. A reasonable amount of after school rehearsals are necessary, but consider yours and your students' families and personal lives. Three afternoon/night rehearsals plus Friday night football game, Saturday rehearsals, and Saturday Contests each week may work for you but is that amount of time good for your marriage, family or personal life – and what about the lives of your students? Some students work and have all have homework.

### Make Friends

- ✓ Make friends with other experienced band directors in the area. This will be a great help to talk about problems and get them "off your chest," and great for advice. This can make your job easier and therefore your personal life will be better.
- ✓ Have friends outside of the music field. This is a great diversion for you and gives you perspective on the "outside" world of work.

### Prepare for Your Retirement

- ✓ Don't take money out of your retirement account if you go back to college, leave the teaching field, etc. It is very expensive to buy back years.
- ✓ Once you begin your career, stay in that state.
- ✓ Make a monthly deposit in an IRA or a differed compensation plan if your state offers them; if not, start one. Don't stop these deposits for any reason.
- ✓ Get your advanced degrees as early in your career as possible; Master's, Specialist, Doctorate. Besides the knowledge you will gain, the higher pay will help in your retirement.



**We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit.**  
***Aristotle***