

This letter serves as my proposal to have the Junior High School Band program split from a 6th/7th/8th grade band into a 5th/6th grade band and a 7th/8th grade band. There are pros and cons to both ways of having the ensembles arranged, but I believe that ultimately we will achieve higher outcomes with the ensembles being split.

I will first outline the pros and cons of the way Junior High Band is currently arranged and will then present the six ways in which I think amending the schedule will be beneficial.

The core positive of having 6th/7th/8th grade band as a single performance group is that it demands a higher playing level from the 6th grade students in order to keep up with the 7th and 8th graders. These raised expectations can aid in the development of the 6th grade students and have them develop more quickly. Additionally, the 7th and 8th grade students act as role models of behavior for the 6th grade students raising them up to the level of older students. This has worked particularly well during the 2016/2017 school year as our current 6th grade has an abundance of exceptional students. This leads to the primary con of the current arrangement. Not every year will have such an outstanding class of 6th graders and during those years, rather than the 6th graders being brought up to the level of the 7th/8th graders, the 7th/8th grade students can be brought down to the level of the 6th graders. When this occurs, the 8th grade students will not be playing repertoire that is as difficult and consequently will not be as prepared for High School Band as they could be. The gap between the highest achieving 8th graders and lowest achieving 6th graders can be quite significant, and even during a year when the 6th graders excel, the gap can still be challenging to overcome.

The first positive of splitting the bands into two groups is the ability to close the achievement gap described above. Not only would this close the achievement gap with the Junior High Bands, but it would create a domino effect that would aid in closing the achievement gap and raise the performance level of every group (sans beginning band). With 7th/8th graders being in a separate band they will be able to perform repertoire that is significantly more challenging than when they are combined with 6th grade band. This will aid in the development of the 7th grade students as they prepare to be the leaders of the band and will allow for the 8th graders to be more prepared for the rigors of High School Band. This will close the achievement gap in High School Band as the 9th grade students will have played more challenging music during their tenure in Junior High Band. Additionally, the 5th/6th grade band will have the ability to play more difficult repertoire which will raise the level of the 5th grade students.

The second positive of splitting the bands is the ability to further diversify and individualize instruction to meet each student's needs. High achieving 6th grade students would have the ability to move into 7th/8th grade band while typical students will remain in 5th/6th grade band and won't be demanded to play music that is above their ability. Additionally, if students decide later in their school careers (5th or 6th grade) to start band, they will have a group to perform with that will not be playing music that exceeds their ability. By splitting the bands, we will achieve much more flexibility for students on all ends of the achievement spectrum.

Another positive to consider is that the school owns a limited number of instruments. For this reason, there are only so many students who can play, for example, baritone sax in our ensembles. However, if the bands are split, we can double dip those instruments and have them be used by twice as many students. Rather than having two baritone saxes total for grades 6-8, we could have two students play baritone sax in 7th/8th grade band and two students play in 5th/6th grade band. This example can be extrapolated to all instruments in the band that students are not asked to purchase themselves.

Being able to double dip on school owned instruments leads to another positive aspect of the bands being split. If the bands are split, both bands can achieve a more balanced ensemble. When 5th grade is left to perform on their own, there aren't always enough students to fill out sections and students are not able to play second instruments (tenor sax, baritone sax, bass clarinet, etc). If the ensembles were split, each group would have a more appropriate breakdown of instruments and there would be ample opportunity for any student who wishing to try another instrument to do so.

Additionally, if the 5th and 6th grades combined into one band, Michelle Matteson and I would be able to team teach the ensemble. This would have a number of benefits. During band rehearsals we would have the flexibility for one of us to run a sectional for a section struggling on a particular part while the other rehearses with the rest of the band. In this way, we can get twice as much done in a single rehearsal. Furthermore, with less time being spent on any single section during rehearsal, students will get to play more which will engage them more and increase their rate of improvement. We would also have the ability for one of us to sit with a particular section during rehearsal. This helps from both a classroom management standpoint as well as an achievement standpoint. Students are much more inclined to behave appropriately when a teacher is sitting in their section and they will improve more quickly by have an audible example of what their part should sound like.

The last positive to splitting the bands is that the current band room is much more suited to hold two grade levels rather than three. Having three grades in the band room at once creates a significant problem with spacing as the band room is too small for that many students with instruments and equipment. Having two grade levels in the band room would create a much more comfortable learning environment for students. Additionally, with three grade levels playing in the band room, the decibel levels exceed 100 dB which is ~30% higher than the safe exposure amount and can cause permanent hearing loss in just 15 minutes (Dobie, 2011). While moving 6th grade out of the 7th/8th grade band won't solve the problem, it will at least move us in the right direction towards a safe environment.

To conclude, there are pros and cons to either way the Junior High Band is set up. However, I believe being able to close the achievement gap, increase diversified instruction, improve ensemble balance, team teach and better utilize our limited space outweigh the positives of keeping the Junior High Band as 6th/7th/8th grade ensemble. Thank you for your time and consideration.

References

Dobie, R. A. (2011). The Burden of Noise-Induced Hearing Loss and Tinnitus. *Audiology Today*, 24(4), 40.