



Rural Schools Team Up to Form the Southwest Marching Band

Between routinely having to travel hundreds of miles for performances and balancing instrumentation in small schools, it can be incredibly challenging for high school music programs in some of the more sparsely populated corners of America to create or sustain a marching band. And yet, a group of teachers in North Dakota have proven that with a little cooperation and determination, kids from small schools can join the fun, too.

Each May, Bismarck, N.D. hosts an annual celebration of music known as Band Night, which features a parade of high school marching bands from across the Dakotas, Montana, Minnesota, and Southern Canada. "Band Night Parade is a vital part of whatever limited marching experience bands can have in our region," says Jeff Eckroth of Eckroth Music, a music retail chain headquartered in Bismarck and one of the primary organizers of the event. However, many of the high schools in Southwest North Dakota have a total enrollment of 150 students or less, meaning that participating in such events just wasn't feasible, until

several high school directors decided came up with an idea.

"I was talking with the band director of South Heart High School, another small school in the area," recalls Catie Hoselton, band director at Belfield High School, which has a student population of 120. "We were thinking how great it would be to go to the Bismarck Band Night parade, but we really can't go because we each only had about 20 kids in our programs. So we thought, 'What if we put our bands together and march them down the street?'"

The two band directors followed up on that conversation by bringing their drummers together to do a cadence. Then they ordered t-shirts that their students could wear along with khaki pants. They gathered the two bands together at noon on the day of the parade, did a quick rehearsal at Belfield High School, then put everyone on two busses and drove the 120 miles to Bismarck to march later that evening.

And just like that, the Southwest Marching Band was born. When word caught on about what was happening at South Heart and Belfield, other small schools in the area (relatively speaking) jumped at the

chance to join in.

"In our region, we [band directors] are all pretty close," says Hoselton. "We have all either gone to college together or know one another. That second year, we talked to Charm Martian at Bowman High School, and said, 'Hey, why don't you come and join us?' So she came and joined us, and then the third year, we talked to Trinity High School in Dickinson, North Dakota, and his band came and joined up with us. The fourth year Richardton High School joined us, because I happen to live there and talked to their teacher, who I knew very well. In 2009, four more schools joined us, and that's when it really got huge. In 2008, it was about 150 kids, and in 2009 it jumped up to well over 300." Currently, about 340 kids from 10 schools, covering perhaps 250 square miles, participate in this cooperative ensemble.

Scranton High School, which has a total student population of 45 in grades nine through 12, is another participant. Along with his 30 high school musicians, band director Mark Perkins brings along approximately 20 junior high school musicians to "pad his numbers," he says with a smile. "All we do [at Band Night] is straight line marching, and we all basically share an equal responsibility for the rehearsals," says Perkins. "We do our own practice at home and then get together just the day of the parade. We spend the morning in sectional rehearsals. There are 10 different directors, of course, so we split the group into ten individual pieces and then go out and do our individual work outside. Then we all put it all together."

While Perkins describes this event as a "flash in the pan" of his yearlong music curriculum, it's also an event that kids are really excited about. "This has kept some kids in band," says Hoselton. "They will come to the band room on the first day of school in August and ask, 'Okay, what are we playing for Band Night?' And that parade isn't until the last week of school! They're already focusing on that. It's really not as huge of an event as it might seem. We have help, everyone works on the same song, and we throw it together in three hours."

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"It's a fun time of the year," agrees Perkins. "After that event there are only usually a week or ten days left in the school year, so it's really a fun way to finish out a good year. More importantly, though, it's the only way we can give these kids a plain old marching experience. There are a couple of our schools that are big enough to do some marching on their own, but my own, for example, is not. I wouldn't be able to give the students any expe-



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rience marching without this. The other residual effect is the camaraderie of working with the other kids. The way they treat each other and get along is really great to see. There are a lot of social benefits that we didn't really count on. We just thought it would be kind of neat to provide that experience for them, and the students have taken it to a whole new level."

While the social element of participating in the larger ensemble has been fun for individuals, it has also served to bring rival communities together. "In sports, we have pretty fierce rivalries between all of these schools, so it's great that we can get them marching down the street with the same kids that they wanted to beat the crap out of on the football field," says Hoselton. "There's camaraderie there and when these kids are from small bands that many only have, say, one flute and two trombones, now they're marching with 50 flutes and maybe 50 trombones. For one day, the kids are a part of something bigger than they even know."

Of course, as one might expect, managing an ensemble of that size brings with it its own obstacles. Instrumentation can be tricky, and balancing the sound of that

The directors who lead the Southwest Marching Band.




many kids in a way so that the entire ensemble is audible is an ongoing challenge. "It gets a little overwhelming," admits Hoselton. "We talk over email or get together in a restaurant and talk about how many kids we're going to have, how many of each instrument, and what our lineup is going to be, but it's become one of those things that's just fun.

It's so good to get the kids together. Yes, we want them to look good and yes we want them to sound good, but we are less concerned about getting the kids on the right foot; this is about music and it's about bringing people together. For one day, these kids get to be in the largest band in the area. If we can do it, anybody can do it. And we're getting better at how we look, too!"

As much fun as it is for the kids, this unique ensemble has also had an extremely positive impact on the Band Night Parade itself. "They add this tremendous dynamic and kind of amazement with more than 300 kids marching down the street," says Jeff Eckroth. "With these small communities, not only do they support their kids in music education and their kids are thrilled to be a part of it – some even stay in band because of it. But it also draws the community into music education, as well. It gives them a purpose to get behind, so they travel to Bismarck to see their kids and cheer them on. It becomes this great experience for everyone involved, not just the musicians. The Band Night parade is pretty cool."

And the benefits don't stop there. The directors of the ten little schools are grateful for this collaborative effort. "It really opens the lines of communications," says Perkins. "We've always been a pretty tight group in this corner of the world because it is a sparsely populated area. We have always worked together a lot, but nothing on the scale like this. After this, though, we don't hesitate to pick up the phone if we've got a question about a piece of music or something else. We share music and ideas on how we do things back and forth. It really has enhanced the communications that we have and made everyone feel more at ease with each other. There's really been no competition, too. I know sometimes people are a little secretive about how they run their programs, but we don't have any of that. We are definitely running wide open program here now."

The Southwest Band is done growing for now, and talk of a tour has fizzled because there are too many conflicting schedules. However, the next project these teachers have taken on is a comparable indoor ensemble, the Southwest Concert Band, which already has 105 students from five of the ten schools in the Southwest Marching Band. The Southwest Concert Band is hoping to make its debut by traveling to Minneapolis for a Memorial Day performance. 

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