

DEVELOPING A FIVE YEAR PLAN

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In response to questions that arose from an article I wrote [Building a High School Instrumental Music Program from Scratch](#), I'm writing this article on how to develop a five year plan. Before you set program goals, you need to develop your own philosophy of teaching. What do YOU want to do as a professional? What do you want your students to gain from working with you? What resources do you need to have to achieve your individual goals?

Once you've decided where you want to go personally, you can then decide on what you want to achieve with the program you wish to build. Whenever I set goals, I always started with the end product first and then worked my way backwards. Simply put, where do I see my program five years in the future? If you can't visualize the finished product you have nothing to strive toward. This shouldn't be vague; you must specifically state your plan—"In five years I'll have the best performing group in my district." Once you establish specifically what you hope to achieve with your group you need to work with them to develop a group "mission statement." You can call this statement whatever you want – that's not important. What is important is getting the group to decide on a unified goal to strive toward. It was my experience that once students had a vested interest in the program's success they worked harder to achieve the program's goals.

After you've decided on the "terminal objective," you can develop short term goals to help you move toward that goal. Short term goals can be by semester or by year but they should be achievable and measurable. Students should be able to see progress. If you decide that you will be able to perform a piece of music of a specific level of difficulty by the end of the year, pull out several of pieces of that grade and play them. Success will be obvious by the end of the year. Choose more than one piece of the same grade because sometimes students don't like a particular piece of music and, no matter what the grade, just won't play it well. You're measuring their ability, not their enjoyment of a particular piece. I learned early on that I couldn't force a piece of music on my students. No matter how much I tried to get them to play a song they didn't like, they just wouldn't play it well.

I always tried not to tie my success to trophies or ratings because even though the group may have achieved its goals and performed well, there's no guarantee judges will consider it worthy of a Superior rating or trophy. My group and I knew how much we had improved, how many of our objectives we had achieved and that we had done our best performance possible on a given piece. Judges only saw a snapshot of the group and could only compare us with standard performance practices of a given piece. As long as we knew we had done our best, we knew we had achieved one of our objectives moving toward our terminal goal. For some groups an Excellent rating or a Good rating may be an achievement. The goal should be reflected in the performance not the rating.

Another important part of the process is frequent assessments. These assessments could be formal or informal. Record the group regularly and have them assess their performance with your guidance. Did they follow all of the markings in the music; was the articulation accurate for

the style of the piece; were the dynamics accurate as marked, etc. Next, bring in another musician to evaluate the group and offer feedback. As problems are exposed, “tweak” the objectives to correct specific issues that were identified. If you allow bad habits to develop, your objective for performance excellence will be severely hampered. In order for your program to achieve excellence over time, you must achieve excellence incrementally. I’ve judged a lot of bands nationally and internationally and have gotten a pretty good idea whether they had program goals or not. Those working towards a specific goal are generally more likely to show more care to each piece of music in a more consistent manner.

Post your goals on a wall or the front door to the classroom as a reminder to everyone what you’re striving towards. You’d be surprised how much this affects your group’s focus. Five years can seem like a long time for students who will be in school for four years. What you’re asking them to do is develop a tradition of excellence that will be their legacy. I would always key on the fact that they were starting a tradition that others would always see as their success. When those students who helped me build a program from scratch came back to concerts after they had graduated, they were always proud of their legacy. They saw a connection with what they had done to what we had achieved.

So when developing a five year plan, it’s important for the architects of that plan to know that they are laying a foundation for the future. The success they will have in the short term will lead to greater success in the long term. Don’t become impatient, small steps lead to giant leaps. I’ve seen too many programs fail because successes weren’t acknowledged. I used a newsletter and posters around the school to highlight our successes and constantly linked the successes to our terminal objective. At concerts I acknowledged our achievement of specific goals and talked about the growth I expected in the future. Surprisingly, my five year plans usually took four years because the freshmen class bought into the plan and worked really hard to achieve it. By the time they graduated they saw the fruits of their labors. Success is contagious and is a self-fulfilling prophesy (if you expect to be successful, you will be).