

Factors Contributing to the Retention Difficulties of Instrumental Music Students from Middle  
School to High School

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Music educators should focus on recruiting and retaining students in their instrumental programs. Changes in socioeconomics, scheduling, student attitude, missing classes for pullout lessons, instrument size, what grade students begin instruction, parent attitudes, teacher support, and condition of instruments may make it difficult to keep students involved in instrumental music programs (Mixon, 2005; Poliniak, 2012; Sandene, 1994).

The term dropout describes students who stop playing their instruments and leave the music program. The term attrition refers to the drop of student enrollment within a music program. The term retention refers to the ability that teachers have to keep students in their instrumental music programs.

Many educators, however, need to be aware of the next step—improving student retention...Students' initial interest and enthusiasm may wane until they decide that other school activities look more fun or interesting; some students may even experience peer pressure to withdraw from a given ensemble or program. (Sandene, 1994, Intro, para. 1 and 5)

The music educator should be supportive and encourage students to stay in instrumental music programs. Teachers should understand how to motivate and retain students, especially during the transition from middle school to high school. Having a knowledge of student motivation will help music educators find techniques to keep students motivated and avoid attrition.

In the end, it's up to you to create a cohesive group where every student is valued, an encouraging atmosphere, and an academically rigorous program--all of which can go a long way towards keeping students engaged and enthusiastic.  
(Poliniak, 2012, p. 45)

## Literature Review

### Elementary School Retention

Martignetti (1965) researched causes of elementary school dropouts and the relation between percentages of those who dropped because of instrument choice and those who dropped because of parent attitudes. Martignetti mailed questionnaires to 86 elementary school music educators. Teacher questionnaires used (n = 56) represented 114 schools. The researcher asked the following questions: types of music classes they teach, music department demographics, grading, testing, students rent or own instruments, is summer music offered, grade-level students begin instruction, condition of instruments, instruments with the greatest attrition rate and reasons for student attrition. The reasons for student attrition were: 55% loss of interest, 27% lack of ability to do work, 12 % illness caused, 4% mortality and 2% for financial reasons. The researcher also conducted interviews with students that dropped out of the music program, parents and teachers. Teacher opinions for the causes of dropouts were: limited scheduling, after school activities, lack of ability, and lack of determination. Thirty-five students reported reasons for dropping as, disinterest in playing, involvement in too many activities, and stress due to grades. Thirty-five parents reported reasons for dropping as, lack of practice time, cost, and grades. Teachers, students, and parents did not agree on the reasons for student attrition.

Hartley (1991) investigated the factors that affect student enrollment and retention in small, rural schools. Fifteen music teachers completed the survey, which provided data about their school programs and the activities offered. Four of the fifteen music teachers participated in an interview. The researchers asked the questions on the following: enrollment, grade-level organization, participation in state festival, number of dropped students between elementary- and middle school and middle- and high school, incentive programs, types of non-music activities

available, booster support group, support from school district and biggest challenges of student retention. The top three reasons teachers stated for student attrition were, scheduling, emphasis on sports, and the time that has to be dedicated to state testing. The contributing factors in music attrition were: scheduling (33%), after school activities (27%), state standardized testing preparation (20%), and other motivators (47%). Hartley concluded, music educators need to find motivators to keep students in their instrumental music programs.

Klinedinst (1991) examined relationships between student retention and nonmusical factors. Fifth-grade students ( $N = 205$ ) enrolled in the band program participated in an evaluation using: Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation; Otis-Lennon School Ability Test; Form R; Stanford Achievement Test, Intermediate I, Form E; researcher designed 5-point Likert-type scale; Attitude Towards Music Scale; Self-Concept in Music scale; Music Background Inventory; Achievement motivation for music; Two-Factor Index of Social Position; a researcher-designed, criterion-referenced; and researcher designed 5-point summative scale. The researcher considered musical aptitude, scholastic ability, math achievement, reading achievement, self-concept in music, general music teacher rating, motivation to achieve in music, attitude toward music, socioeconomic status, music background and instrumental adaptation assessment. “Reading achievement, math achievement, and socioeconomic status all had a low but statistically significant relationship to student retention ( $r = -.18$  to  $.25$ ,  $p < .01$ )” (p. 233). Through studying teacher records, Klinedinst found that 76% of 205 participants were still playing. Klinedinst concluded that you could predict student retention based on the 11 independent variables. Socioeconomic status, intelligence, and music aptitude were significant predictors of student retention.

Hartley (1996) investigated attrition and retention of wind and percussion students and their grade-level organization. Band directors ( $N = 50$ ) from middle- and junior high schools participated. Hartley compared schools' grade-level organization, if they housed fifth- and sixth grade in the same building or if they housed them separately. Sixty percent ( $n = 45$ ) of band directors returned the Band Director's Questionnaire and surveys. Hartley gathered information from the questionnaires about enrollment in three stages: initial enrollment, end of first year of instruction, and beginning of seventh grade. The researcher took the following demographical information taken into consideration: grade-level organization, school type, starting grade-level, change of directors, number of class meeting times, and years of teaching experience. Hartley found, twenty-three schools began instruction in fifth-grade and 22 schools began in sixth-grade. Twenty-two of the schools housed fifth- and sixth-grade in the same building, 23 in a split setting. During the first year of instruction, students beginning instruction in sixth-grade had more rehearsals than those who began in fifth-grade. There was no effect on the band's enrollment if students begin band in either fifth- or sixth grade. Hartley found the only significant difference was between grade-levels in which the students enrolled and the number of rehearsals each week. The ensembles that met daily had a smaller attrition rate than classes that met two to three times a week. Hartley's research showed that grade-level organization of students seemed to have some influence but not enough to be statistically significant.

Hartley and Porter (2009) researched when to begin string instruction and affects on the quality of education, staffing, and student retention. The researchers used three primary determinants of beginning instructional grade: initial string enrollment in the first year of playing, retention in seventh-grade, and music performance level. Secondary determinants: decision makers, grade-level organization, private lessons, and scheduling of instruction. One

hundred and seventy-two elementary-, middle-, and high school orchestra teachers completed a survey of twelve basic questions. Researchers used to, “determine starting grade level of string instruction, schedule of instruction, school district building organization, school location demographics, initial enrollment, and retention information” (Hartley & Porter, Method, para. 15). The researchers also made personal visits to 22 schools to compare performance achievement. Researchers found: 1.8% of students began in third-grade, 54.8% in fourth-grade, 32% in fifth-grade, and 9.6% in sixth-grade. Elementary and middle school respondents ( $N = 166$ ) retained 80% of students who enrolled in fourth-grade, 72% of students enrolled in fifth-grade, and 88% of students enrolled in sixth-grade. The researchers found no statistically significant information. Initial enrollment in fourth-, fifth-, or sixth-grade, did not affect retention of students.

### **Secondary School Retention**

Rawlins (1979) researched reasons for student retention, the influences of student attrition in music programs, and if music teachers and music dropouts agree on the influencing reasons. The researcher recorded interviews to determine why students dropped out of the instrumental music program. Rawlins interviewed 50 students, 21 music teachers, and 6 administrators. Rawlins researched topics such as: school pressures, problems and conflicts, feeling toward self, parental pressure, health-related reasons, and peer pressure. Rawlins found some music dropouts still played at home at least once a week. A large number of students dropped out of band due to school related pressure, problems, and conflicts. This area accounted for 31 out of the 50 students interviewed reasons for quitting. The researcher states that this study may aid in retention and assist in minimizing dropouts from the music programs.

The importance of maintaining control over the number of students continuing will help the overall balance of an ensemble.

Solly (1986) studied student attrition, between grades, of a large school district's instrumental music program. The researcher examined, reasons students and parents have for dropping out and reasons why students were continuing in the instrumental music program. Solly studied students from 12 elementary schools, 2 junior schools, and 2 high schools. Questionnaires sent to parents and students who dropped band, asking about the reasons students remain in band. The second part of the questionnaire required students and parents to circle the phrase that applied most to the reasons students drop band. Solly found the main reasons for dropping music were: disliked playing, scheduling conflicts with courses, loss of interest, did not like to practice, change of interest, and conflicts with non-school activities. The greatest attrition of students occurred between sixth and seventh grades. Solly concluded music teachers at one school level were not encouraging or motivating students to remain in band when transitioning to another building.

Boyle, DeCarbo, and Jordan (1994) examined directors' views of middle- and junior high school student attrition in instrumental music programs. Band directors ( $N = 50$ ) responded to a questionnaire about student attrition. Scores based on a four-point scale, for 19 possible reasons students dropped music, suggested by review literature. Students ranked lack of commitment to work as the high ranked reason for students dropping music. Students ranked scheduling conflicts, lack of parental support and loss of interest as 3.0-2.5. Students ranked lack of success on instrument, lack of musical ability, competing interests in sports, lack of communication or support from high school band director, little time, and cost as 2.5-2.0. Conflicting with previous research data, band directors did not perceive after school jobs as a reason for student attrition.

The researchers concluded the biggest factor to music educators was a, “need to re-think their instructional and motivational strategies to meet this challenge” (p. 8).

Corenblum and Marshall (1998) assessed the relationship between continuing in music, musical aptitude, and musical achievement. Ninth-grade students ( $N = 253$ ) from seven schools participated. Researchers used structural equation modeling to describe the relationship between criterion and variables. Researchers interviewed and observed students and teachers. Students and teachers completed a questionnaire. The following questions were included on the questionnaire: attitude towards band program, perceptions of parental attitudes, outside interests, and perception of band director. Students indicated their current averages in core academic classes and if they planned to continue in band next year. Teachers gave a performance rating to each student to estimate their current grade in band. The researchers found that attitude, teacher evaluations, and socioeconomic status affected student retention. Researchers found that student socioeconomic status, predicted student retention based on student attitudes and parental influence. “The finding that socioeconomic level predicted retention and attitudes of parents and teachers has a number of implications for music instruction and teacher training” (p. 137).

Hayes (2004) conducted a survey of band directors to find perceived reasons for student attrition and retention in band. A decline in enrollment during the transition from junior high school to high school frustrated teachers. High school band directors ( $N = 164$ ) participated in the survey. The survey contained questions about demographics, enrollment, teaching experience, and reasons affecting student enrollment. The researcher evaluated basic demographic information using a Likert scale. The next section of the survey consisted of 34 statements that could affect student retention. The researcher found that the number of credit hours a student takes in high school have increased causing the number of credits left for



electives to decrease. The researcher also found the most important reasons students were motivated to continue in band was parental influence, enjoyment of music, and social aspects.

Gouzouasis, Henrey, and Belliveau (2008) studied teacher understanding of students and student retention in band programs. The researchers collected data from seventh-grade students in four groups using ethnodrama, an arts-based research in the form of a research script. The researchers found that life experiences directly affect whether band students will continue in music. Some students found music fun and defined band students as successful and strong individuals. Others labeled band students as “geeks.” The researchers identified possible strategies for student retention, using qualitative research. The researcher used four types of schools: regular elementary, fine arts elementary, fundamental middle-, and high schools. The researcher also interviewed band directors from the schools. The sizes of the focus groups varied between three and nine students, twenty-three students participated in total and contained both male and females who were and were not planning to continue music. The researchers used a phenomenological approach in this research that and uncovered information about student attrition. The researchers took out unnecessary information from the script that did not pertain to the study. The researchers found several reasons students did not continue in music, none of which matched the band directors’ assumptions. Dramatizing the research allowed the researcher to understand and speak logically about students and social influences on retention. The researchers believed music educators did not know why students were dropping and should continue to be proactive in promoting their programs. The researchers found, eighth-grade students have more classes they take, leaving less room for music. The researchers also found that band teachers had minimal impact on retaining students.

Kinney (2010) studied ways to predict student retention in urban middle school band programs. The researcher used a two-model logistical regression analysis technique to predict initial enrollment and student retention. Kinney used several independent variables: socioeconomic status, academic achievement, family structure, ethnicity, and gender. The researcher used two middle schools with one band director for this study. This factor assisted researchers to study the effect of teacher recruitment and retention in the music department. The schools used in this study fell below poverty line and identified as school that need improvement. Since middle schools used sixth- and eighth-grade students to measure academic achievement, Kinney did as well. Sixth-grade ( $n = 402$ ) and eighth-grade ( $n = 340$ ) students were studied and only 69 sixth-grade and 50 eighth-grade students were enrolled in the music program. Kinney conducted a logistical analysis on sixth-grade students based on family structure, reading test scores, and gender. Kinney conducted a logistical analysis on eighth-grade students using logistic regression multivariable analysis for reading scores only. Nonmusic [sic] influences did affect students' initial enrollment and retention in their music programs. Significant factors contributing to student enrollment were academic achievement and family structure. Students from a two-parent or two-guardian family were those who achieved higher academically. Students who achieved higher academically also remained in the band program.

### **Limitations**

Researchers have studied many reasons related to attrition and retention in school music programs. Researchers found statistics on the retention of students between elementary- and middle school, but did not have enough statistics for retention between middle- and high school. Researchers also suggested methods of student retention for music educators. There was no definitive research on the relationship between student motivation and retention. There was not

enough research studying the music attrition rate from middle school to high school. “Directors who can adapt their teaching philosophy to meet students’ needs will be the most likely to retain students during the transition to high school” (Hayes, 2004, p. iii). Researchers should investigate peer pressure, class scheduling, and perceptions of middle school students.

### **Rationale**

Due to high attrition rates, high school music educators find it difficult to create ensembles and maintain class sizes during the transition from middle school to high school. This can lead high school music educators to pick easier music and offer fewer classes. This can affect the educational value of the classes. It is important to find reasons that impact student attrition in the transition from middle school to high school, and what techniques and strategies educators can use to keep students involved in music programs.

### **Purpose and Problems**

The purpose of this research is to find the factors that contribute to student dropout between middle school and high school instrumental music students. Research questions are:

1. What reasons do students give for attrition in middle school music programs?
2. What reasons do students give for attrition in high school music programs?
3. What are the contributing factors to student attrition between middle school and high school music programs?

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