All Choirs

Keep the Student First… and the Rest Will Take Care of Itself

by Nathan Dame

It's the first day of school. A freshman treble singer walks in with a major attitude toward structure, other students, and basically everything that counters what she wants to do. Each rehearsal is a struggle, but each day gets a little better than the last. After a few weeks, we discover that she loves to sing and is actually quite good at it. A few weeks later, we begin work on our tradition of holiday processional music. As we're practicing how to move with tea lights, our freshman pushes another student in class because she was walking too close and later explains, "She was looking at me funny." Singing…check! Community building…still a work in progress.

After a swift reaction (one she still remembers to this day), we start to chip away at the "why." As each rehearsal passes, our relationship strengthens. We begin to understand why she's here, why working with others is such a challenge, and, essentially, why there is so much anger. That connection turns into retention, and she comes back sophomore, junior, and senior year—not just because she likes to sing, but because through building the relationship first and putting the music second, she has found trust in others through something she enjoys.

Twenty years ago, before I stepped into the classroom, a wise boss gave me some parting words: "Keep the student first, and everything else will take care of itself." That phrase has anchored my philosophy. I've carried it into several communities, at different levels, in schools of different sizes, and with students from every socioeconomic background. The circumstances change. The students change. The challenges certainly change. The philosophy has not.

Success happens when kids know they are cared for, that they are seen, that they are part of something successful, and that the priority of "student first" is consistently reflected in our teaching. So when I think about building a choral program, I keep coming back to the most important phrase in that advice: KEEP. THE STUDENT. FIRST.

Keep

Any conversation about recruitment should begin with retention. Simply put, engage the singers you already have through the experiences and lessons you provide. Before we worry about getting more singers, we should think about keeping the singers already in the room. Of course, that discussion is loaded. College programs deal with non-major course conflicts, campus fees, and degree requirements. High schools seem to offer more and more specialized electives alongside a top-down push toward college preparatory courses, leaving less room for choral music. Middle schools often ask students to choose between beginning an instrument or singing, among many other competing opportunities. We cannot control all of those things, but we can control the experience students have when they walk into our rooms. Consider these questions:

1. How does your choral program engage the students who are already there?

2. How does it make them want to return tomorrow? Next semester? Next year?

3. How does their experience make someone standing outside your program think, *I want to be part of that*?

Recruitment and retention are not separate ideas. Your current students are your greatest recruiters. Consider how visible experiences such as concerts, public events, traditions, trips, social opportunities, and performances can create "buzz" among singers and those not yet in choir. Students notice when their peers are part of something exciting. They notice when a group performs with excellence. They notice when students are proud to wear the shirt, talk about the trip, cele-

brate a performance, or simply enjoy being together. Excellence attracts. That doesn't mean every performance has to win an award or every choir has to sing the most difficult literature. Quality matters because students want to know that what they are doing matters. They want to belong to something successful, meaningful, and larger than themselves. There is joy in doing something well, especially when that success is shared with others. Yet visibility and excellence only get us so far. We also have to ask questions.

Why do your students stay? Why do they leave? What do they look forward to? What gets in their way? What would they tell another student about being in your program? Sometimes we spend tremendous energy trying to figure out what students want without ever actually asking them. Listen to them. That doesn't mean every suggestion becomes policy or that students dictate the direction of the program. It means their perspective matters because their experience matters. Recruiting a student into choir is only the beginning. When they take a chance on us, they're showing vulnerability. It's that same vulnerability that can lead to a deeper, longer-lasting relationship. The bigger question is: How do we *keep* them? We look at THE STUDENT.

The Student

Notice that the foundational phrase isn't "keep the choir first," "keep the program first," or "keep the music first." It is "keep the student first." We teach kids music, in that order. Choir directors are trained to hear singers. We hear the unsupported tone, the late entrance, the spread vowel, the wrong pitch, the singer who isn't matching the section. Our training teaches us to listen to what we hear, diagnose the problem, and determine what needs to happen next. But how well do we know the person producing that sound?

Relationships matter. Students need to know they are more than the voice part they sing, the spot on the riser they occupy, their ability to sing a solo, or the contribution they make to the ensemble. We have to know who they are when they are not in the choir room. Some of our singers leave rehearsal and head to athletics. Others go to theatre, band, debate, robotics, or dance. Some agonize over making sure they remain at the top of their class. Some go straight to work. Some go home to care for siblings. Some are balancing responsibilities we will never see. Knowing their stories enriches what we create together in the choir room. It also means recognizing that every student sitting in front of us has a different level of investment.

Choir can be every student's "thing," but it doesn't have to be *the* thing. Whether you have a die-hard choir kid, an overcommitted student, or someone who was placed in the class by a counselor, all of them deserve our attention and the opportunity for a meaningful relationship. That leads to an uncomfortable question: What do our rehearsals look like? If they cater primarily to the most committed student, should we be surprised when others fail to see how they fit and ultimately drop the class?

The same is true instructionally. Students don't all process information the same way. Some need to see it. Some need to hear it. Some need to move. Some need repetition. One student can understand immediately, while another student needs the same concept presented three different ways before it clicks. Student-centered teaching asks us to adjust instead of simply wondering why they haven't adjusted to us. Knowing the student does not mean abandoning the needs of the ensemble. In fact, the better we know the individuals in front of us, the better equipped we are to move them toward a common goal. A choir becomes a community when students realize two things at the same time: *I matter here* and *who I am and what I do matter to everyone else here.*

First

The final word may be the most difficult one. Putting students first sounds obvious. Most educators would say they do it. But our priorities are revealed less by what we say and more by the decisions we make. I continually try to ask: *Who is this decision actually serving?* Look inward at the traditions in your program. Are they serving the students you have now, or are you protecting them because "that's what I've always done"? Consider the rehearsal structure. Is it designed around how students learn best or simply around how you learned to rehearse? Consider the performance calendar. Are all of those events meaningful experiences for students, or

are some there because you feel obligated to maintain them? Consider the literature. The trips. The auditions. The uniforms. The expectations. The schedule. Whom are they serving?

Putting the student first occasionally requires us to let go of something we like. It might mean changing a tradition. It might mean choosing different literature. It might mean saying no to a performance opportunity that looks impressive on paper. It might mean realizing that another trophy, another ensemble, another trip, or another line on the director's résumé isn't what the students in front of us need. And this is important: *student-first does not mean student-easiest.*

Putting students first does not require lowering expectations. It does not mean eliminating accountability, avoiding difficult conversations, or allowing students to determine every decision. Remember the freshman from the beginning? Sometimes putting the student first means holding a firm boundary because the student needs it. Students deserve excellence. They deserve teachers who believe they are capable of more than they currently believe about themselves. They deserve meaningful literature, thoughtful instruction, high expectations, and the satisfaction that comes from doing difficult things well. Caring about students and demanding excellence are not competing philosophies. In the best programs, they feed each other.

Students are more willing to take musical risks when they trust the person asking them to take those risks. They are more willing to accept correction when they know correction isn't rejection. They are more willing to work for the ensemble when they believe the ensemble has a place for them. That is where student engagement becomes something greater than simply keeping kids entertained. Engagement means doing. It means singing, moving, listening, questioning, struggling, trying again, and eventually succeeding. The students in our choirs aren't audience members in the rehearsal. The students *are* the rehearsal. And when students rise to the top of the priority pyramid, other things begin to find their proper place. Director ego gets out of the way. Awards matter less. Traditions become more purposeful. And the all-too-common comparison trap becomes a waste of energy.

Keep the Student First

That freshman from the first day of school eventually became a senior. I would love to say that somewhere along the way every challenge disappeared and every rehearsal became perfect. It didn't. That's not how students work, and it certainly isn't how relationships work. But she stayed. She sang. She grew. She learned how to function within a community that needed something from her while discovering that the community had something to give her. And ultimately, that is why the philosophy given to me twenty years ago has remained so important. We spend a lot of time in our profession talking about building successful programs. We count enrollment. We celebrate ratings. We post audition results. We recognize invitations, performances, awards, and accomplishments. There is nothing wrong with celebrating those things; they represent tremendous work by students and teachers. But they make poor starting points. The success of a choir program should be the *result* rather than the objective.

If we KEEP students by creating experiences they want to return to; if we know THE STUDENT behind the singer and build a place where that individual can belong, contribute, and grow; and if we put that student FIRST when our priorities are tested; then retention, community, musical excellence, program identity, and growth have strong foundations on which to develop.

The numbers may grow. The performances may improve. The traditions may become stronger. The awards may come. But more importantly, the students will know they were part of something that mattered and that they mattered to it. Twenty years later, I still haven't found better advice: Keep the student first… and the rest will take care of itself. CJ

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