As a Title I school band director, one of my most difficult days was always our instrument drive. I dreamt of watching each student leave with a shiny new instrument in their hands and a smile on their faces, but it always ended up being just that—only a dream. Instead, I was met with parent after parent leaving because they had no idea how expensive an instrument would be or because they did not possess the proper identification or credit to rent an instrument from the local music company.

More often than not, I am faced with the question of whether their interested child can still do band without purchasing an instrument. It has been my goal and practice that no matter what, my answer remains yes!

Even if a program is fortunate enough to have a large supply of school instruments available for rent, chances are there will still be situations where students have to share instruments. This makes rehearsing, buying into a program, and practicing at home a huge challenge.

A few years ago, I was approached by a couple who asked if there was anything they could do to help out the students in my band program. After thinking about this for some time, I created an instrument sponsorship program that not only has helped respond to the shortage on instruments but also has increased pride and buy-in to the band program.

I asked individuals to donate a relatively small amount of money ($100–$300), and I used that to purchase instruments for my students in need. I use these donations to seek out good quality, used instruments from local music shops, Craigslist, and eBay. In return for their donation, the donors receive a tax receipt from the school, a handwritten thank you note from the student, and with permission, a picture of the student holding their new instrument.

As a result, the student has an instrument that they can call their own. Upon receiving the instrument, the student signs a contract stating that this is their instrument as long as they are in band (the instrument is subject to inspections to ensure it is being properly maintained). If the student ends up losing interest, the instrument simply goes back to the school and is donated to another student. However, if the student graduates from the music program, the instrument is theirs forever. Not only does this give the student pride and ownership in having their own instrument, but it also encourages them to stay in the program and to grow as a lifelong musician.

The program has proven beneficial for all involved. Our band program has more instruments available, and our participation has increased. The donors are pleased to make a very personal, trustworthy, and significant donation to a great cause. And most of all, it creates a feeling of pride and joy for a student who otherwise may have been forced to abandon band altogether.

Many people have fond memories of being in band and are looking for good ways to help, and I can’t think of a better way than giving a student the gift of music.

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