

Exploratory Band – The best band method for your child

Dear 5th Grade Parents,

I am very excited about our new exploratory approach to 5th grade band this year. After doing extensive research into similar programs, working on logistical details and carefully weighing the pros and cons of this curriculum model, I am convinced that your child will experience the best instrumental music education possible with Gilbert's unique "5-day" Specials schedule.

I recognize that you and your child may have questions or even reservations about this approach. I hope that the following details of the curriculum model and the explanations behind it provide a clearer understanding of why this approach is better than continuing to force an older model into a newer system.

The previous curriculum model for 5th grade band was superb within the old "6-day" schedule, and Gilbert schools were noted for our exceptional elementary instrumental music programs. In that system, students came to band 2 out of every 3 school days and attended class based on the instrument they played (e.g. all of the flutes came on the same day, all of the trumpets came on a different day). The regularity of instruction promoted consistent reinforcement of playing skills at school and regular monitoring of at-home practice through practice logs submitted as homework. By structuring the classes based on which instrument a child played, all students were on task much more frequently during class. For example, when only flutes and clarinets came to class, they received significantly more time to play their instruments because they did not have to wait idly while differing instruction was given to the trombones and trumpets.

The realities of Gilbert's current "5-day" schedule are that students come to band with much less regularity than before and attend band based on which regular education classroom they are in, rather than by the instrument they play. Specifically, students now come to band twice per week (a significant improvement over last year's once/week); occasionally, a full-band day is added (apx. 12 full-band days throughout the entire school year). This results in a 25% decrease in instruction at school compared to the old "6-day" schedule and a significant change in the instrumental composition of the class from the preferred, like-instrument groupings.

The current schedule allows for basic reinforcement of technical skill at school, and the change in class structure from being based on like-instruments to being based on classroom teacher places an improbable burden on the amount of time students get to actually play their instruments in class. Students might be in a band class made up of 1 flute player, 2 clarinets, 12 trumpets, 1 trombone and 5 percussionists. Without modifying the instructional model, those students play less during class because specific instruction must be given to five different instrumental groups rather than two groups of like-instruments. In addition, several students may be the only ones playing their particular instrument (the 1 flute player and 1 trombone player in my example). This eliminates the proven benefits of peer modeling and cooperative learning for those children.

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Specific evidence supports discontinuing the older 5th grade instructional model within our current schedule:

- Class time spent actively playing instruments is noticeably less in the older model. At the beginning of the school year, many students waited for a considerable amount of time, several class periods, while other instrument groups were instructed on sound production. In most band classes, there were between four and six different instrument groups.
- Students using the 5-day schedule turned in fewer practice logs and more frequently forgot their required materials (instrument, pencil, music, etc.) than students who used the 6-day schedule.
- Assessment benchmarks developed under the 6-day schedule to determine what students should be able to demonstrate on their instruments were not met under the 5-day schedule and were simplified or removed.
- Individual students who were the only players on their instrument in a class did not play confidently, participated less and struggled to reach their potential without a partner to help them.
- The divide between students who gained reinforcement of skill through consistent at-home practice and those who relied only on playing at school was much more expansive.

The instructional model must adapt to the current schedule so that students can experience the best possible instrumental music education. Since students come to class based on classroom teacher rather than like-instruments, limiting the instrument choice results in more efficient use of class time and more playing time for students. Students who are more actively engaged will have more fun, better assimilate the musical lesson and increase their level of belonging to the group. All students, especially singular players, will participate to a greater degree and develop confidence more quickly.

Recognizing that individual students have interests in a variety of instruments, all core instruments will be taught during the first semesters of the school year (percussion, brass and woodwinds) in six-week units. In December, based on a combination of student preference and teacher assessment over the three units, your child will be placed on the instrument with the greatest opportunity for continued success going forward. All students will play mallet and non-pitched (snare drum) percussion for the first six weeks, a brass instrument (choice of trumpet or trombone) for the second six weeks and a woodwind instrument (choice of flute or clarinet) for the third six weeks. All of the instruments cost the same to rent from local music stores. There is no difference in price between the new instructional model and the old model.

Simply put, limiting students to one or two like-instruments during the beginning stages increases time on task during class, fosters greater student participation, nurtures confidence in a group setting and ensures that each child will eventually play the instrument best suited to their success.