

No Excuse for Failure: A High Achieving Music Program in a Low Academic Achieving School

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Schools with a high proportion of minority students or students living in poverty often fail to meet academic standards and lack strong and successful music programs. This pattern may be explained by the fact that high-SES, low minority schools have more parental support and budget allocation, better facilities and lower student to teacher ratios than high minority, low SES schools. The 4A Roma HS Band in southwest Texas, has a population 100% Hispanic and 86% economically disadvantaged, yet, it has a thriving band program. Since 2000, Roma has been a state marching finalist and Texas Honor Band finalist 4 consecutive times, and has placed 133 students in All-State ensembles. How did this happen?

Demographic characteristics

Roma is in southwest Texas's Rio Grande Valley. Directly across from Ciudad Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas, Mexico, Roma is an entry point to Mexico. Roma's history is linked to the Spanish colonial period, and several structures remain from this era and have been designated a National Historic Landmark. The town has grown from a population of 2,154 in 1970 to 9,617 in 2000. Most residents (93.7%) speak a language other than English at home, and are Hispanic or Latino (98.5%). Just under half of Roma's population over age 16 is in the labor force, and 48.9% of families in Roma live below poverty level. The median household income in 1999 was \$15,563 (Census Bureau, 2000).

History

The Roma Band has grown rapidly in the past 15 years from very modest beginnings into an organization that serves over 300 students in grades 6-12. The growth of the program and their numerous awards can be attributed to the support and dedication of the students, teachers, administrators, and community. Previous to 1993 the band program was very small (about 70 students) and the band performed primarily in parades. In 1993, school district supported the addition of new music teachers and the reorganization of the band program to allow for a marching band to perform at football games. Under the direction of Alfredo Cortines and Rudy Barrera, the band program began to grow. Today, students participate in large numbers for All-Region or All-Valley and UIL Marching and Concert Band competitions.

The teachers

In Roma, teachers focus on developing individual student skills and each director oversees the instruction of students on his or her primary instrument from grade 6 to grade 12. All directors assist with the marching band, and their schedule allows for all 10 teachers to travel from the high school to both middle schools each day. The directors divide morning, lunch and afternoon duties at each school so there is always a teacher to supervise practice, to allow students to pick-up and drop-off instruments, and to work with individuals and groups.

The philosophy

The teachers at Roma have very special relationships with their students. They understand the need to be an authority figure and to push students to excel. Among researchers studying the cultural context of teaching and learning, many authors have described successful teachers of minority students as “warm demanders” (Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Ware, 2006; Kleinfeld, 1995; Vasquez, 1998). Teachers who fit this description have a unique understanding of their student’s culture, home language, and other factors that can enable student success. They teach in a way that is demanding and often misconstrued as “mean” or “too hard.” In talking with students, however, they acknowledge that their teachers expect a lot but that they also recognize that the teachers give a lot of their time and reward them for their successes. The many trophies, newspaper clippings, and photos that line the walls in the band building serve to remind current students of their achievements.

What people say

“Roma is where you go to learn to teach.” -Roma Director

“Roma is a small town where there is not a lot for kids to do.” –Band Parent *“A pattern of success began was established, and it became understood by both the teachers and community that the band would advance to state every year. Students knew they were joining a successful program.”*
-Band Parent/ School District Administrator

*“We love it.
Cause we sounded really good.
It gives you energy. It gives you a happy feeling.
Yeah it does.”- Middle School Students*

“Band has built such a productive, positive, high-performing reputation that the standards are high, the expectations are high.” -Roma Superintendent