

Thank You for All the 2s

Darcy Vogt Williams

In our current era of post-UIL “We Made a 1” selfies and Facebook posts, I’m going to put this out there:

I’ve made a 2... lots of 2s.

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- I made All State Band twice, and I’ve made a 2.
 - I graduated Summa Cum Laude, and once I started teaching, I made 2s.
 - My bands have played at Midwest and WIBC, and I’ve made 2s...many 2s.
 - My bands have been State Finalists in Honor Band the last two times, and I’ve made 2s... lots of them.
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I whole-heartedly believe there is a level of determination, humility, resilience, work ethic, maturity, and appreciation that only comes after you have received a 2 and reinvented something about your teaching.

I took my first band to contest in 2006. I got straight 2s. “*Never louder than lovely*,” and “*always balance to the melody*” were written all over my comment sheets. Listening to the tape (the cassette tape) afterward, it was painfully obvious how right they were. I spent every concert preparation thereafter making sure my kids knew what the melody was and layering underneath.

In 2007 I walked to sight reading positive we deserved a 1 on stage. Instead, I got a 122, 222. “*Clarinet tone spread*”, “*clarinets are unfocused particularly above the break*”, and “*clarinet tuning will improve when tone does*”... I realized I didn’t know what tone I should be hearing from my clarinet section, or that I could

expect a tone different from what they were giving me. I cornered many band directors in the months and years that followed (still today) to improve how I

was approaching my clarinets to achieve a characteristic tone and not detract from the hard work of the rest of my band.

2008 was my fourth year teaching and first year as a head director. I finally had it figured out! We prepared very carefully. I had brought out mentor teachers to hear and critique my band. As we concluded our warm up, I told my kids how proud I was of all their hard work and then gave my band the final words of encouragement that will stick with me forever and never cross my lips again: “Now go out there and leave it all on the stage!” Never tell middle school brass players to leave it all on the stage... because they do. “*Brass – no, no, no! Beautiful sounds always! Never create excitement through volume!*” 222, 111.

In 2009 I finally found the balance between good teaching and mature performance preparation. Five years into my career I received my first sweepstakes. “*Superior band, well taught.*” “*Wonderful job of musical interpretation.*” “*This was one of those*

sit back and enjoy performances.” Thank God...

2010: 111, 111 ooh...consistency! “*Enthusiasm in some sections—like*

tubas—occasionally created ‘splatty’ tone qualities.” I have had to address “enthusiasm” every year and constantly remind myself that middle school kids are indeed capable of controlling their “enthusiasm”... Yes, let’s call it that.

Just when I thought I had the hang of UIL, in 2011 I got a 111, 122. You might remember the sightreading piece that year. Many of

us do... Sometimes the best lesson you learn from UIL is not how to better prepare but how to address disappointment with maturity, grace, and honesty.

Every 1 I have received from 2012 on has been the product of taking all the 2s I’ve ever received to heart and changing something important about how I teach. I was hurt, embarrassed, and thankful for each of them.

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we teach our students. What we do with those ratings is another story.

Instead of viewing anything less than a 1 as a failure, (after we cry and the red of our cheeks fades back to sanity) we should approach our UIL ratings as a checkpoint in our teaching and **not** an isolated performance. We have all told our students at one point or another that UIL is a single snapshot of their abilities, and while that is true, that snapshot is still the culmination of months of preparation. That performance is the result of your fundamental block since August. Those three pieces demonstrate everything you hold important in your teaching. So what can we do?

1) What issues appear consistently through my critique sheets? If all three stage judges are commenting on the same problem, it is a problem. And it's probably a problem every day.

2) What can I do starting tomorrow that will address this issue long term? Is there a new fundamental exercise I can incorporate into my daily drill? Do I simply need to prioritize my listening during rehearsal to truly require myself to expect that skill to improve? Is this a problem I can prevent through my beginner teaching?

3) Who can I ask to help me better teach a skill? Is there a master teacher I can invite to come listen to and work with my band? Is there a master teacher I can send a recording to and ask for feedback or ideas on how to better address the skills I struggle to teach?

4) Did I pick music that was so difficult I could only work on notes and rhythms? The UIL critique sheet specifically mentions 18 different musical skills we should be incorporating into our daily teaching, and only two of those are notes and rhythms. While "teaching to the test" is a four-letter word, teaching to our UIL Concert standards is just good musicianship. No trained musician would

argue that matching note length is optional or that unison tuning or characteristic tone production are negligible aspects of music. We are the trained musicians, and it is our job to make these non-negotiables for our students as well. This can only be accomplished if we pick music in which the basic demands of the music are developmentally appropriate for our students so that we can focus on all aspects of the musical performance, not just the notes and rhythms.

5) Now, I need you to read this in the most loving voice you can imagine... **Stop making excuses for why your students cannot accurately perform the skills mentioned on your critique sheets and look for solutions.** If we are going to take credit for all of the wonderful things our students can do, we must also take credit for all of the things they cannot. Your students only know how to do what you require them to do. If you do not require staccato, they will not perform staccato. If you do not work on tuning in rehearsal, they will not tune during a performance. If balance is not addressed daily, they won't think about it when they get nervous. We may not be able to control what happens when they leave the band hall, but we can directly control what is addressed while they sit in front of us.

I once watched a band director tear up their UIL sheets in front of the band and proclaim, "That's what I think of their 2s." The band cheered. I was horrified. If I want my students to take my constructive and thoughtful criticism to heart for the betterment of their musicianship, I can only hold myself to the same standard. The purpose of UIL is not to feed my ego or that of my program with another trophy, but it is a lot easier to take great pride in my work when I know that I am holding *my teaching* and my students to the standards of good musicianship.

Darcy Vogt Williams is the head director at Stiles Middle School in Leander ISD. Since opening Stiles in 2012, her Honors Band has performed at the Midwest Clinic in 2015, placed 3rd at TMEA CC Honor Band in 2015, and placed 7th at TMEA CCC Honor Band in 2017. Darcy is a graduate of West Texas A&M University. When not teaching she loves working with power tools, gardening, traveling with her husband, and playing with their daughter Caroline.