

One Junior High Band Director's Approach to Week 1 of Covid 19.

Sunday evening 3/15/20

It was the last day of Spring Break. I had been thinking about how to have band remotely since the announcement of school closure 4 days ago. Not too worried because it was only a week.

This week was supposed to be Pre UIL week for the McCullough Band. Sunday evenings, I always send out regular reminders about rehearsals for the week. There were LOTS of reminders for this week. I had already drafted the email. Eerie actually. It had so much excitement in the tone. So, I started my email with "my normal Sunday routine is to send you the schedule for the week and to give any details needed." Obviously, this wasn't necessary. I went on to say, "at this point you know as much as I know. Stay tuned, I will be in touch with a way for us to have an online "rehearsals" this week."

I spent Sunday asking several of my friends who are small business owners how they utilized Zoom for their team calls. I had some great ideas, my friends filled in the blanks as to how to set things up.

Monday morning 3/16/20

Sent email to top band families with link to download Zoom. Reminded them to get parent permission. Planned to use recordings of our contest music as the focus of the rehearsal. I knew I couldn't hear them all at once, but really thought it would work. At least they would be playing their instruments.

Monday early afternoon 3/16/20

Emailed link for first Zoom rehearsal for top band of 76 students. Created norms/rules that must be followed. These included: must wear school appropriate clothing, must be sitting in a chair with a music stand, must be willing to play individually, be respectful and patient, and that nothing was private; the call would be recorded. Also invited our private lesson staff.

I got back a lot of responses from parents and students that they were ready to go! I was a nervous wreck - had no clue what I was doing. But I knew I was doing the right thing.

Monday 2:30pm 3/16/20

60 students on the Zoom call! I couldn't believe it! Incredible positivity. They loved seeing each other. All followed the rules. We struggled a little with muting/unmuting. A little bit of talking over each other. But over all they were super respectful.

Started with Daily Drill. I sang, put my metronome to the microphone. We did Concert F Follow through, our whole routine. I checked in on them - that's when I learned about the sound delay. So on the spot decided to use modeling for articulation. We had some specific articulation stuff we were working on. So I called out kids to unmute and demonstrate, everyone to copy. It was awesome. We did the F scale down and up 1 octave and 2 octaves, tongued and slurred, different tempos. All successful!

The kids shared that using headphones really helped to hear better. (I don't have any headphones so I would have never known this!)

For rehearsal, I used youtube recordings of our contest music for them to play along with. Unfortunately, we are not at performance tempos yet so we had many struggles on technique stuff. But still, successful. Learned a lot about muting in/muting out and realized smaller groups would probably be better. Many private teachers came on call as well. This was so cool to see them too. At the end of the hour I asked the students what they'd like to do. Overwhelming request: Sectionals please!!!

Takeaway: Our music didn't get better. At all. But I got to check on my students. And they got to check on each other. They were happy. It was something NORMAL. And, they played their instruments. A win in every category.

Monday evening 3/16/20

Created a plan for 4 one-hour sectionals to occur for Tuesday. Sent links and a reminder to bring metronome/tonal energy, AND, that everyone had to wear green for St. Patrick's Day! (That's what we'd have done at school, so keeping it normal!) In the meantime slowed down tempos on youtube links, with help from colleagues. Created a good lesson plan for sectionals including better accountability and modeling, and individual playing. Would also utilize metronome use and pitch checking for all of the known problem spots.

Monday evening: Announcement that school was closed through April 10. I was shocked. What about all the things we have on the calendar between now and then. What about UIL?

Tuesday 3/17/20

11am-3:30pm

Incredibly successful sectionals. 73 of 76 students were on the call. Emailed the 3 that weren't to make sure their family was okay. Heard back immediately, they just had conflicts. At the beginning of each sectional, I checked in with the kids about the announcement of school out so long. Mostly they were sad. A little anxious and worried about how the online school would work. They asked about all our band stuff. I just had to be honest - I didn't know. Learned about the 40-minute limit of meeting (scheduled sectionals for an hour), so went ahead and purchased the membership for \$15 for the month. Three of the four sectionals got cut off but we all jumped back on. Almost all of the kids wore green for St. Patrick's Day...and the few who didn't get a "virtual pinch" in the chat. JH kids are the best. They made me laugh a lot - some showed the green spec on their sock or shoe...if you teach JH then you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Tuesday evening 3/17/20

Sent out schedule and links for Wednesday, alternating times because kids complained getting up early! They were all about sleeping late!

Wednesday morning 3/18/20

Held a zoom meeting with band director friends and colleagues. Amazing collaboration and suggestions. Recording of that zoom call is on

youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grgwToJYa40>

Was really an honor to be on this call with such caring and dedicated music educators.

Wednesday 3/18/20

11am-3:30pm

Successful sectionals. All students except ONE attended. That one still out of the country. Checked in with every student, let them share a little. Asked them what was something good happening with being out of school. Biggest answers: "my brother/sister is home from college", and "my family is playing board games". We did a lot more individual playing (down the row), and more play throughs of big chunks of the music, as we would have done at school with pre UIL scheduled for Friday.

Wednesday evening 3/18/20

Decided NOT to have sectionals on Thursday. Thursday was the day that all teachers on my campus were required to post all students assignments on Canvas. My band kids were a little anxious about it - they had shared this during our sectionals. Not knowing what to expect seemed to make them pretty nervous.

Sent out an email Wednesday evening that the band assignment was to take a walk outside to celebrate the first day of Spring on Thursday! Email also included Friday's sectional schedule.

Thursday 3/19/20

Day off from rehearsals. Spent time in the morning planning for next week collaborating with my colleagues and setting up scheduling for zoom rehearsals with entire band program. We talked about what the curriculum goals were. We brainstormed that we could include scales to prepare for end of year auditions, AND, continue working on our contest programs for our Spring Concert. We acknowledged the struggle for each of us, different, but one thing in common...we miss our students a lot and hope they are okay.

Then I completed my own assignment and went for a drive with my husband to see the bluebonnets. It was exactly what we both needed.

Thursday afternoon: UIL suspends all activities until May 3. Had gotten notification earlier in the day that another of our performance events was cancelled. My heart was/is broken. Oh how I want so badly for my students to get to perform this great music they have been working so hard on.

Friday morning 3/20/20

Up early for great day of sectionals ahead. Today was supposed to be our Pre UIL. I planned to have "virtual" preuil, complete with the official stage announcement and actually "perform" our program start to finish using youtube recordings. Then we would do our sightreading portion using the Sight-reading Factory program and screen share. I was really excited about this. I also planned to tell the students about no UIL.

About an hour before rehearsals were supposed to begin, I received notification from our school district that we were not allowed to use Zoom. It felt like a gut punch. Quickly notified my students with sadness and received so many emails back. Parents have said that these rehearsals gave their children a sense of normal and have given me much gratitude.

With quick thinking, I decided to have the kids do Pre UIL at home. I sent an email with links for the kids to play their band concert for their families AND do sight-reading too using sight-reading factory. I included these words, "if appropriate for your family at this time", because I know a lot of families are stressed right now. I asked the parents to take a picture of their child and email back to me. I've gotten many pictures and positive responses back! My heart is full.

Finally, we have an approved plan for students to come get their instruments and binders on Monday. I have a list of kids, so will go early and get their things out of their band lockers. They'll drive up to the sidewalk outside the band hall and I'll leave the instrument on the curb and walk away quickly. Saying this right now, I think it's going to be hard.

I'll be spending the weekend learning the "conferences" feature on Canvas. Hopefully we can keep our same schedule that we planned for next week. Lots to learn, lots to revise, and lots to communicate. I am seriously grateful for so many colleagues who have offered to help me learn.

As the end of Friday approaches, I am watching the news and the numbers of confirmed cases climb. I am worried, not so much for myself and my husband,...but for my 80 year old dad who lives alone, for my friends and family across the world, for my colleagues near and far, and for our band families. But mostly, I just really, really miss my students. With all my heart I just want to teach them in the band hall again. And, give them the incredible memory of performance.

*Susan Meyer Patterson
McCullough Junior High Band
Conroe ISD*