

Some Thoughts on Elementary Choirs

I have a loosely-auditioned 4th and 5th grade choir of 70 members. There are about 200 total 4th and 5th graders in our school. We practice once a week after school for one hour and 15 minutes. We are occasionally allowed to practice during recess when preparing for a performance. This is how I choose and organize:

- I listen to all the 4th and 5th graders sing during the first couple of weeks of school. They come into my office in pairs (for moral support) during class while others play music games or do music book searches. They all sing "Happy Birthday" (octave) and a short folk song learned the previous year. They also sing a major and minor tone pattern (*so-mi-do* and *la-do-mi*).
- I score the kids with a rubric. Last year's members do have to sing again, but are automatically in.
- Just to prevent later problems- check with your principal about the academic criteria for a child to be in choir. Our school has a policy that students must have passing grades on report cards to participate in any extra-curricular activity, so before I officially invite students, I check with previous and present teachers to see who will need extra encouragement. In extreme cases, I may be asked not to invite a particular child, but generally, I can invite anyone who qualifies vocally. They will self-eliminate (at least until the next grading period) if they receive an "F" on a report card.
- I invite the 4s first, then 3s, and so on, until I reach 70. I don't usually go below a score of 3. I take 70 because according to the law of averages I'm not being too picky, but I'm keeping some vocal integrity in the group so that we can accomplish more difficult music than in the typical classroom.
- Come up with a catch name...it will make the kids feel special. We call ourselves Eastern Pulaski **ExPrEsS**. The capital letters are our school's initials; **E**astern **P**ulaski **E**lementary **S**chool, and we express ourselves through music!
- I schedule an evening parent meeting during which the kids sing a few short songs and I distribute a handbook which I have developed over the years. The handbook contains all pertinent parent information. I also have the kids sign a commitment pledge. (Copies of the handbook are available on request.)
- I use parent volunteers to sort music, set up refreshments at our concerts, and help with other organizational tasks.
- We sing a good mix of octavos and good songs from our texts, mostly unison and 2-part, occasionally 3-part. I get a lot of music from Heritage Music Press, the "Sing Out" and "New Horizons" series.
- We have a small budget of \$250 from a gifted and talented grant, but receive most of our financial support from the music boosters, who graciously allow us

- \$1000 of their budget. (Attend every booster meeting!) Parents pay for a polo shirt (with our logo) and black pants and shoes, but they do not pay dues. When we have a field trip that involves cost, any who cannot afford the trip (or the shirt, for that matter) are picked up by the music booster budget. Check with your booster organization if you are low on funding!
- I issue music in a numbered folder, and the kids are responsible for any octavo that they lose!
 - I use a table or spreadsheet on computer when entering info about my kids. I enter their name, folder number, homeroom, phone number, and birthday. Using a table or spreadsheet allows me to sort the info to any format I need, such as an alphabetical or homeroom list, or birthdays in month order.
 - With just one rehearsal a week, it can be tempting to teach by rote. I pick out something in each piece that I use to teach music literacy, even if I can't take the time to pick the entire song apart.
 - I enlist the help of last year's members to point out spots in the music, check posture, and be my "teaching assistants." They think this is really cool.
 - I make choir membership worth the practice time by having several performances. We present a Christmas and Spring concert by ourselves, go on at least one big field trip a year, sing in non-competitive festival, Circle the State, and All-State, and perform for nursing homes and community organizations (without over-committing).
 - We celebrate birthdays, have cookies in the middle of long rehearsals, have folder-remembering contests, give each other back-chops when we're tired, take 30-second naps, and laugh a lot.
 - I work with coaches, who agree to share the time equally with choir when they have a sports practice after school on choir day. Cultivate a great relationship with coaches...it's valuable! (Think *High School Musical!* ☺)
 - Love what you do; the kids will be able to tell right away if you're unmotivated, unprepared, or "have to" do choir.

If you have any school choir questions, I'd be happy to answer them from my perspective and experience. We've enjoyed 18 successful seasons, and the program is very popular with kids, parents, and administration. (Note—I do receive a stipend of around \$800, written into my contract).

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