



Column: The best extracurricular activity at many high schools is band, particularly marching band



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KALAMAZOO, MI — A friend and I who have eight children between us who have all gone through high school have a theory about extracurricular activities.

The theory is this: The best extracurricular activity at many high schools is band, particularly marching band.

The reasons have little or nothing to do with music, and everything to do with the unique characteristics of high school band and its ability to promote positive social relationships.

Here's what makes band unique:

- Counting summer band practice, it's often the only school activity that's year-round. So, unlike sports teams or the theater cast or the forensic team that's close-knit for the several months the members are together but not so much for the rest of the year, band members are together all year, which tends to create close friendships.
- The fact that band is a class as well as an extracurricular offers two advantages. One is that band students get a teacher that they'll have for all four years, which can be a real asset in terms of having a school adult who gets to know them particularly well. The other advantage is that, since their class schedule is built around band, band students tend to have other classes and their lunch period together, helping to reinforce band friendships.
- At the risk of making a broad generalization, band kids tend to be the kind of high-achieving, relatively well-behaved students whom a parent would want for his or her child's social group. And peer relationships are a huge factor in whether a teen's high school years are productive or a train wreck.
- Band is unusual in that it groups all four grades together. Unlike sports, band doesn't divide students into freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams. That makes for a more united group as kids move through their four years of high school and gives more opportunities for older kids to mentor young kids. Incoming ninth-graders who participate in summer band practice or camp before entering high school have junior and seniors greeting them in the hallways even during the first week of school.
- Marching band is an excellent vehicle for teaching a host of skills such as discipline, teamwork and the importance of following directions. There's nothing like being the person who messes up a formation in a marching-band competition or hits a sour note during a concert to drive home the point that every individual's contribution counts, for better or worse. True, band is not unique in this respect, but I would argue that it drives those skills home

exceptionally well. Band also is an activity where practice really does make perfect. It teaches teens that simply relying on raw talent doesn't cut it.

- Band directors, particularly of marching bands, like big numbers and typically work to accommodate every student. For teens who think they're not good at anything, band can be an activity where their contribution is valued and they can feel part of something big and important. It's also an area where struggling students can shine. Until he graduated, one of the best percussionists in my daughter's band was a boy who was developmentally disabled.
- Many other school activities don't pay off until junior or senior year. With band, even if teens want to move on in the upper grades, they've already received the benefits.
- I fully realize the benefits of other activities. I've had kids in everything from mock trial to track and cross country to school musicals to the Art Honor Society, and they've all been wonderfully enriching experiences.

But if I had an eighth-grader who was worried about making friends and nervous about high school, I'd be encouraging that child to give marching band a hard look. If the child doesn't play an instrument now, the band director likely will find a spot somewhere for that child.

Experts say that the key to high school success is rigor, relevance and relationships. Band hits on all three: It offers the rigor of learning to play music while marching in complex formations; the relevance of the discipline and team skills that benefit teens long after high school, and relationships that can develop and deepen over all four years of high school.

As for the music? That's the icing on the cake.

This column was written by Julie Mack for the MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette. Contact her at jmack1@mlive.com or 269-350-0277, or follow her on Twitter at [Twitter.com/kzjuliemack](https://twitter.com/kzjuliemack). [Click here for more columns by Julie Mack.](#)

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