

New Construction Interview (Unabridged Version) Prior Lake High School, Prior Lake, Minnesota

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Planning Ahead

Even 18 months before the bond election for our new school, I started a spreadsheet on my computer for all the music equipment we were going to need. I put down everything I could think of – from music stands, microphones and practice rooms to even extension cords and duct tape!

This is key for getting a budget – doing your homework and listing everything. For two years, I kept adding to this list every time I used something. (“We’ll need music stand lights for when we do musicals.”) My big ‘needs list’ included specific manufacturers’ model numbers and costs.

Later, when we were just months away from occupying our new building, our principal asked each department for capital requests. I had my complete spreadsheet ready -- six pages, with \$650,000 worth of stuff. Many other departments were scrambling at the last minute.

Getting Involved; Calling Wenger

The day after the bond passed, I did two things: I told the principal I wanted to be on the design committee and I contacted Wenger. I discussed the new building with my Wenger rep, along with the equipment we needed and our timetable. Although our move-in date was still two years away, I wanted to start buying some equipment immediately because I had approval. I asked Wenger for convention-discount risers when they became available. My basement and garage stored Wenger risers for two years – it was absolutely worth it.

The principal saw that my efforts were saving \$1,000 here and \$2,000 there, and he didn’t reduce my budget accordingly. I even drove a truck down to Owatonna several times to save the \$200 shipping charge. I spent all the money I saved on additional equipment.

I’ll admit it -- I’m cheap. But my students and the people who walk into our music facility appreciate it. My reputation for thriftiness and running a tight ship has developed over the years. For example, fifteen years ago, our district was in dire financial straits. Even file cabinets were in short supply at school, which is how I stored my sheet music. I told the principal I could free up three of my \$150 file cabinets for other teachers in exchange for \$50 in shelving and \$25 in boxes. Now we use a Wenger Music Library System at our new school, and it’s working out great.

So despite having to trim my initial budget request, my wheeling and dealing and saving enabled me to get everything on my needs list, and then some. Because I did my homework, I was even able to have a choir accompanist position added to the increased school staffing included in the bond.

Communicating Frequently

Throughout the planning and construction process, I communicated frequently with the principal and planning committee.

For our \$4.5 million auditorium, I told the administration that a \$95,000 Diva shell was like buying upholstery for a new car. The new car would run without upholstery, but it's the upholstery that people notice and that completes the finished look. This approach made all the difference in the world.

With the Diva shell and practice rooms, I emphasized how they were permanent parts of the building. This changed the budgeting approach – they were considered building fixtures and equipment, not part of the music department budget. That was a tremendous help.

From my earliest meetings with the architect, I insisted on dedicated storage areas in the auditorium for the Diva, Signature risers, Versalite platforms and grand piano. Although we did not own any of that equipment at the time, I knew we would either when we moved in or shortly afterward. We needed to plan for storage space during the design and building -- not later. I didn't want them just stuck in a corner, in everyone's way. I provided measurements of the storage space required, and after I raised the question multiple times, they finally listened. I was nice and friendly, but also insistent.

Drawing on Credibility, Hard Work

As a long-term teacher in the district, I had built up credibility. And I didn't surprise anyone – I had been communicating my needs during the previous 18 years.

I work hard, with my nose to the grindstone. I'm not flashy, but I really support the kids and have high standards. I tell other teachers they need to build up their programs first, then ask for the supporting resources. It doesn't work the other way around – administrators can't afford to fund speculation. I'd already shown my administration that the music program was worth supporting.

Our principal, school board and superintendent are all strong arts boosters. And although no one was giving me blank checks, they did listen to my needs.

Justifying Investment in Wenger

Once in a while someone would question my choice of Wenger products, because they are more expensive. I'd explain that I wanted high-quality products that will last, and choosing Wenger is a wise investment.

I know how school budgets work. When capital funding is available for purchases, there won't be money five years later for replacements. It's going to be 20 or 25 years, so we need to buy equipment that will last that long. I want the good stuff. And if that means waiting a few years until enough money is accumulated, I will gladly wait.

Even after three years, our new Wenger equipment is still in excellent shape and we're going to keep it that way. The taxpayers have entrusted us with

the funds and the equipment necessary for this facility. We are only stewards of it.

Some of our older Wenger chairs were purchased with fundraising money. So I tell my students, 'The school didn't buy those chairs, you did.' And the students keep these chairs looking new.

When we need something else in the future, we'll invite the decision-makers to see all our existing Wenger equipment -- how well it's holding up and how well we're taking care of it.

Signature Risers

I love the Signature risers for their ease of setup – very slick! One person can handle them easily. They're good-looking, handsome and sturdy. My students feel very comfortable on them.

We have four-step risers, and even with smaller choral groups we space the singers out a little bit more, so they have two or three feet between them. I think this helps them relax because they're not so crowded. Their sound projects better because it isn't pinched. It's more open, relaxed and free. The audience always comments about how professional they look and sound.

Having high expectations and the right equipment helps the kids raise their own standards – how well they sing, how they walk on stage, and how they stand tall and proud.

Note: Mr. Hassig was the 2005 Minnesota Music Educator of the Year and a Top Ten Finalist for Minnesota Teacher of the Year in 2006. In 2004, Prior Lake was recognized as one of the top 100 Communities for Music Education in the United States.