



Sound Effect: Texas High School Plans Successful Music Suite

Community pride in the music program at Samuel Clemens High School was increasing in the early 1990s, along with student participation and the skill level. However, the facilities for music education had not kept pace as the band size climbed from 65 students to more than 230 over the previous 10 years. “Discouraging” is how band director Fran Badrak described music education facilities at the school, which is located northeast of San Antonio, Texas, in the Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City I.S.D.

As part of a comprehensive bond package, the district proposed constructing a new music facility. The referendum failed. “Money is always tight and -- like most communities -- we have a vocal faction that opposes any bond issue,” says Herb Rehmann, district director of auxiliary services. The district then separated the package into line items, which Rehmann calls a wise decision because it clearly outlined the cost for each project.

Even before the initial referendum, Badrak began researching music facilities by gathering information at conventions and visiting nearby schools. “I attended town meetings about the bond package to share what I’d learned and answer questions,” says Badrak.

“Fran started his homework early and spearheaded the effort,” explains Rehmann. “And most importantly, he had demonstrated success with his program.” When the \$1.6 million music facility bond passed in 1994 it received a strong 72-percent approval rating.

The district served as general contractor for the project, hiring a construction management firm with a successful history in the district and an architectural firm experienced with music education facilities.

Effective Communication. “Keeping everyone ‘on the same page’ through effective communication was the secret to our success,” notes Rehmman. “In addition to the construction manager and architect, planning involved the school board, principal, band director and district staff.”

Once the bond passed, Badrak accelerated his research efforts. “I talked to educators in other districts to learn what specifications they used in the music suite -- right down to the number of electrical outlets in the wall, the kind of lighting and even the height of the chalkboard,” explains Badrak. All of this background information was compiled into a booklet that he shared with other planning team members.

“Fran showed us his needs without being demanding,” remarks Rehmman. “Because he believed in the project so much, it was easier for all of us to support it. We basically told him, ‘Here’s the square footage available for your area -- you make it work.’”

“It’s our responsibility as music educators to explain the important elements of a music suite beyond the cost-per-square-foot,” says Badrak. “We have the most at stake in the final outcome.”

The *Planning Guide for Secondary School Music Facilities* published by Wenger Corp. (www.wengercorp.com) was a useful tool for Badrak at this stage in the process. “The information helped give me a good jump start on what needed to happen and the key factors to consider,” explains Badrak. Information is also available from the Acoustical Society of America (asa.aip.org) and the Music Educators National Conference (www.menc.org).

Space, Acoustics. Adequate space was Badrak’s first concern. “We needed enough space and the proper acoustics for students to rehearse.” The existing music area -- including offices and storage -- totaled only 3,000 square feet. “Our rehearsal space was too small, so we were forced to use the stage,” explains Badrak. “I also wanted practice rooms to accommodate both solo and ensemble work.”

Because music is learned through listening, space and acoustical considerations are critical to an effective music suite. The single most important feature of a rehearsal room is adequate cubic volume -- enough space for sound to develop and blend

effectively. With an optimal ceiling height of 18-22 feet, a band/orchestra room should have at least 2,500 square feet of floor area, and a choral rehearsal room should have at least 1,800 square feet.

Proper acoustics in the rehearsal room enable the director and students to hear balanced sound clearly, without risk of hearing damage from excessive loudness. Absorber and diffuser panels on the walls and ceiling can help create the proper acoustical environment. Finishing materials like carpet or drapes are acoustically inferior to panels because they absorb only higher frequencies and do nothing to diffuse sound.

To improve sound isolation between rooms, Badrak requested special soundproof doors on all rehearsal areas. “They’re terrific -- you can’t hear anything if you stand outside during a rehearsal.” Adds Badrak, “It’s like a vacuum.” To accommodate oversize music equipment, the doors are four feet wide.

Storage, Equipment. Storage space is always at a premium in a music suite, and underestimating storage needs is a common problem. “We could certainly use more storage space,” agrees Badrak. “But we sacrificed some storage areas because space for rehearsal and practice was a higher priority for me. I guess I’m biased toward areas that directly impact kids.”

Instruments, sheet music and folders, robes and uniforms and other miscellaneous equipment used in the music suite together represent more than a \$300,000 investment at a typical high school. Protecting this investment requires secure, specialized storage systems including cabinets, lockers or racks.

When choosing storage systems or any music equipment, Rehmann says product quality should be an important consideration. “Until recently, Texas law forced us to accept the lowest bid,” says Rehmann. “Unfortunately, some companies would give inaccurate product information just to get the contract.” If you have any doubt about a product’s quality, ask to see a sample or talk to other customers.

“During a side-by-side comparison of instrument storage cabinets, our principal was able to bend one door quite easily with her bare hands,” notes Badrak. “The difference between the two was like night and day.”

When researching sound-isolating, modular practice rooms, Badrak visited installation sites and requested information from two manufacturers, including lists of their customers. “I showed the lists to the board and pointed out that there were probably important reasons for the significant discrepancy between the number of customers each had,” says Badrak.

Just as an itemized referendum package had helped get the music facility bond approved, Rehmann believes a similar line-item approach works well with the school board. “If you outline your needs, the options and the various price tags, I think boards are more receptive,” says Rehmann. After reviewing Badrak’s information and considering other non-price factors, the board approved the purchase of Wenger cabinets and practice rooms, although the cost was \$40,000 above the low bid.

Once construction started, Rehmann was contacted several times by contractors suggesting alternatives that would save money but compromise quality. “They’re often more concerned about the four walls than what’s inside,” explains Rehmann. “I had to be hard-nosed sometimes, but I knew exactly what Fran wanted and I knew his reasons.” Rehmann gives Badrak credit for helping establish this atmosphere of teamwork and ongoing communication among the planning team from the earliest stages.

The band’s first rehearsal in the new music suite took place in February 1996. “I could see the pride our students felt in their new space,” explains Badrak. “They were also concerned about taking care of it to keep it looking good.” Badrak says the practice rooms are used every day. “As our students’ individual musicianship has increased, it’s raised the performance level for the entire band, including success at awards competitions,” comments Badrak. “I attribute a lot of this to finally having a facility that everyone can function in.”

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