

CHOOSING A BAND INSTRUMENT

There are many factors to consider in choosing an appropriate instrument for your child to study in the Elementary Band Program. The following information is designed to assist you in the process.

Each section below explains the different instruments offered in the band lesson program. Both the positive aspects of the instrument and those that might make it less appropriate for your child are included. In the end, your child should choose the instrument that sounds best to him/her. Students will practice more consistently if the sound of their instrument is pleasing to them.

FLUTE

Physical Considerations: Flute requires all ten fingers to work independently. Because of the way the flute is held (off to one side), it can be difficult to make a sound at first. It takes some coordination and lots of practice and experimentation. Students must use a lot of air to make sound, and therefore it may not be appropriate for students with asthma or other upper respiratory difficulties. Students often experience dizziness while playing at first until they get accustomed to using enough air. Because of the use of the lip muscles, flute may not be appropriate for students with cleft lip.

Sound Quality: The flute is a woodwind instrument and has a soft, delicate sound. It plays the highest notes in the band, and often has the melody. It can sound “airy” at first until students learn to control their lips.

Other Considerations: Flute is the smallest band instrument, which means it is light and easy to carry. The case does not have room for the lesson book, so students must carry that separately. It can take a while for students to make a sound on flute, and it requires patience, commitment, and LOTS OF PRACTICE!

OBOE

Physical Considerations: The oboe requires all ten fingers to work independently. It is held comfortably in front of the body, but requires a larger finger spread than any other woodwind instrument. It may not be appropriate for students with shorter fingers or small hands. It also may not be appropriate for students with asthma or cleft lip due to the use of air and lips.

Sound Quality: The oboe is a woodwind instrument with a very unique rich and prominent sound. It plays on the higher side, but not as high as flute. It often plays the melody or interesting harmony parts in the band. It can be difficult to make a sound on oboe at first due to the double reed and the precise nature of the instrument. It takes a lot of patience, commitment, and PRACTICE!

Other Considerations: The oboe can be a difficult instrument to get started on due to the finger spread and the difficulty of making a good sound at first. Students who choose oboe should be very dedicated and committed independent learners who do not get frustrated easily and are willing to work hard. Oboe is also one of the more expensive instruments to rent and maintain. It uses a double reed to make sound, and one reed costs about \$10-12. Students should be able to use a reed for a month or two if they take care not to chip or damage it. Four to five reeds should last a student the whole year if they are not damaged. Beginners should buy “medium soft” strength reeds. For students who are up to the challenge, oboe is a very fun and rewarding instrument!

CLARINET

Physical Considerations: The clarinet requires all ten fingers to work independently. It is held comfortably in front of the body. Students must be able to cover the “tone holes” completely with the pads of their fingers, so students with very small or thin fingers may be better off starting on saxophone or flute. Clarinet does not require as much air as some of the other instruments, and so it can be a good choice for students with asthma. It can also be a good choice for students with cleft lip because the upper lip is not used as minutely as with other instruments.

Sound Quality: The clarinet is a woodwind instrument that has a sweet and gentle sound when played properly. It has a large range from low to high, but generally plays mid to high notes in the band. It plays a lot of melody and interesting harmony parts. In the beginning, clarinet is prone to “squeaks” until the student learns to control the air and lips, but this is part of the learning process.

Other Considerations: Clarinet uses a reed to produce sound, which means reeds must be purchased regularly. A single reed costs about \$2, and a box of 10 reeds costs about \$14. Students should go through about 2 boxes of reeds per year. Beginners should start with a reed strength of “2” and move to a “2 ½” by the end of their first year or beginning of their second year. The clarinet is small, light, easy to carry, and usually includes a space for the book inside the case. It is a great beginning instrument!

ALTO SAXOPHONE

Physical Considerations: The alto saxophone requires all ten fingers to work independently. It is slightly larger than the other woodwinds but uses a neck strap to support the weight of the instrument, which hangs to the right side of the body while sitting or standing. Even smaller students with small fingers can be successful with alto sax. It requires more air than clarinet, but not as much as flute. It is therefore an acceptable choice for students with asthma. It’s use of the upper lip is similar to clarinet, making it a good choice for students with cleft lip as well. The case is a little heavier to carry, but is not unmanageable.

Sound Quality: The alto saxophone is a woodwind instrument with a louder, fuller sound than the other woodwinds. It has a mid-range in the band, and plays some melody as well as interesting harmony and countermelody. It is a great jazz instrument, so students looking to play in jazz band in middle school may be interested in this instrument. It is difficult to control the volume of the saxophone initially, so expect it to be fairly loud. It is somewhat prone to “squeaks” at first, but this is part of the learning process.

Other Considerations: Alto saxophone uses a reed to produce sound, which means reeds must be purchased regularly. A single reed costs about \$3, and a box of 10 reeds costs about \$20. Students should go through about 2 boxes of reeds per year. Beginners should start with a reed strength of “2” and move to a “2 ½” by the end of their first year or beginning of their second year. The alto sax is a little more expensive than some of the other instruments due to its construction, but is a great beginning instrument.

TENOR SAXOPHONE

Physical Considerations: The tenor saxophone is a larger version of the alto saxophone. It has all the same physical considerations as the alto saxophone, but on an even larger scale. It requires much more air and a larger finger spread. It is only recommended for slightly larger students.

Sound Quality: The tenor saxophone is a woodwind instrument with a full, low sound. It usually plays lower harmony parts in band and is also used extensively in jazz music. It tends to be fairly loud in the beginning.

Other Considerations: The tenor sax has a few caveats. First, it is one of the most expensive instruments to rent, and also requires the purchase of reeds like alto sax (but tenor reeds are more expensive). It is also a very large and heavy instrument when in its case; it is too large to be taken on the bus and too heavy to

carry to school. Therefore, students who play tenor sax need to have a parent help bring the instrument to school and take it home on lesson day. Students who are interested in tenor sax should keep in mind that the middle school has some of these instruments to lend out when you get to that level. Many middle school students will play some alto and some tenor sax (or even baritone sax!) In general, it is recommended that students begin on alto sax in elementary school, but the option is there for those who are serious about tenor sax and can meet the above conditions.

TRUMPET

Physical Considerations: The trumpet is held in the left hand and played with the first three fingers of the right hand. It is held comfortably in front of the body. The use of the lip muscles is very important, and therefore it may not be appropriate for students with cleft lip. Trumpet works best for students with slightly smaller or thinner lips, but can be played successfully with almost any size lip. It also requires the use of a steady air stream, but does not use as much air as the other brass instruments, making it a better choice for students with asthma.

Sound Quality: The trumpet is a brass instrument with a high and brilliant sound. Brass instruments are louder than woodwind instruments, and are easy to hear in the band. The trumpet is the highest brass instrument and plays a lot of melody. It is also used in jazz music. The trumpet (and all brass instruments) requires buzzing the lips together to make sound. It takes time to build these lip muscles to play different notes, but it is usually possible to make some kind of sound right away.

Other Considerations: Brass instruments require use of the ear to hear different notes and buzz the lips accordingly. Therefore, students with a “good ear” and who can sing “on pitch” tend to be more successful with trumpet and other brass instruments. The trumpet itself is a nice compact size and weight, and it’s a great beginning instrument!

FRENCH HORN

Physical Considerations: The French horn is held with the right hand inserted into the bell and played with the first three fingers of the left hand. You do not have to be left handed to play French horn, and it is usually not an issue at all to play with the left hand. It can be difficult to position the French horn into playing position, and it is recommended for students who are slightly larger or taller. As with trumpet, the use of the lip muscles is very important, and therefore it may not be appropriate for students with cleft lip. French horn works best for students with slightly smaller or thinner lips, but can be played successfully with almost any size lip. It also requires the use of a steady air stream, but does not use as much air as the other brass instruments, making it a better choice for students with asthma.

Sound Quality: The French horn is a brass instrument with a smooth and beautiful rich sound. It plays in the middle range for brass instruments, and usually has very interesting countermelody and harmony parts as well as some melody. Like trumpet, it takes time to build lip muscle for different notes, but it’s possible to make some sound right away. Of all the brass instruments, it has the largest range from low to high. It is louder than most woodwind instruments, but a little quieter than most of the brass instruments.

Other Considerations: French horn is another instrument with some caveats. Due to the difficulty of positioning the instrument and the difficulty of producing the correct pitch (more so than other brass instruments), students who choose French horn should be very dedicated and committed independent learners who do not get frustrated easily and are willing to work hard. Good chorus students, strings students, and piano students often make good French horn players. More than any other instrument, a “good ear” is required to play French horn. It is also one of the most expensive instruments to rent. Students interested in French horn should also keep in mind that starting on trumpet and moving to French

horn later after a year or so can be a more affordable way to start out in band. However, for students up to the challenge French horn is a very fun and rewarding instrument!

TROMBONE

Physical Considerations: The trombone is held in the left hand while the right hand grasps the “slide” and moves it to the desired position. Because of the slide, this instrument may not be appropriate for the smallest students (trumpet or baritone would be a better choice). It takes a little more coordination to hold than other instruments, but most students are able to handle it. Like all brass instruments, it requires the use of the lip muscles and may not be appropriate for students with cleft lip. Trombone also uses more air than most instruments, meaning it may not be appropriate for students with asthma. It is a good choice for students with slightly fuller lips, although it can be played successfully with almost any lip size.

Sound Quality: The trombone is a brass instrument with a full, low sound. It can be played loud but also soft and sweet. The trombone is the lowest of the brass instruments offered, has a large range, and is used in jazz music. It often plays low bass lines, fun countermelody and harmony parts, and melody in the band. It is unique in that it is the only instrument that can make a “sliding” sound called a glissando due to the slide. It uses the buzzing of the lips to make sound like all brass instruments.

Other Considerations: The trombone reads in bass clef, which is new to some students, but can be learned quickly with consistent practice. Piano students or cello students who know bass clef already have an even quicker time learning trombone. Due to the slide, students with a “good ear” and the ability to “sing on pitch” are more successful on trombone. It has an oblong case, but it is not unmanageable. Trombone is very unique and is a great beginning instrument!

BARITONE

Physical Considerations: The baritone is cradled in the left hand against the body and played with the first three fingers of the right hand. It uses the lip muscles and may not be appropriate for students with cleft lip. It also uses a lot of air and may not be appropriate for students with asthma. It is a little larger and heavier and works best with slightly larger and taller students. It is a good choice for students with slightly fuller lips, although it can be played successfully with almost any lip size.

Sound Quality: The baritone is a brass instrument with a full, low sound very similar to the trombone. It shares the status as the lowest of the brass instruments offered. It too plays low bass lines, fun countermelody and harmony parts, and melody in the band. It uses the buzzing of the lips to make sound like all brass instruments.

Other Considerations: The baritone has some caveats. It is a wonderful starting instrument, and one of the easiest instruments to begin making sound on. However, it is larger and heavier than most of the other instruments, especially when in its case. Like tenor sax, it is too large to go on the bus and too heavy to carry to school. Therefore, students who play baritone need to have a parent help bring the instrument to school and take it home on lesson day. It is also one of the most expensive instruments to rent.

HOWEVER: there are a few school owned baritones available to help alleviate some of these problems. A student renting a baritone may request use of a school instrument for use at school, alleviating the need to take the instrument back and forth. Or, a student may request the use of a school instrument if the cost of renting is prohibitive, as long as they have help getting it to and from school. There are only a few instruments available on a first come first served basis; please contact Mrs. Clark kclark@sau29.org to inquire. It would be worth it to play this instrument!

PERCUSSION ~ BELLS & SNARE DRUM

Physical Considerations: Percussion requires the use of both hands, and students stand to play (although arrangements can be made for students unable to stand). Percussionists learn to play multiple instruments with different techniques, so it is a good choice for students who pick things up quickly and have good coordination. The idea that “anyone” can play percussion is somewhat of a common misconception. Percussion instruments are actually some of the most difficult instruments to learn properly. Students with a good steady beat and good hand-eye and body coordination are the most successful at learning percussion.

Sound Quality: Percussion instruments are typically the loudest in the band, although a convenient and quiet practice pad and bell set make practicing at home no louder than any other instrument. The bells and snare drum are what your child will be focusing on in lessons, although they may play other instruments in Tuesday night band (highly encouraged especially for percussionists).

Other Considerations: Due to the nature of playing in the percussion section, certain learning styles and personality traits tend to lead more to success. Because there is a lot of “down time” for percussionists during band, students who can follow directions, can remain attentive even when not active, can organize their materials independently, and who are not easily distracted will be the most successful. Students who are distracted easily, have trouble following directions, and need constant supervision to remain organized may find percussion to be overwhelming, confusing, and difficult. These students may find one of the other instruments to be more manageable and enjoyable because it is stationary (seated) and constantly active (you play on every piece). Percussion also requires dedicated practice and commitment. Keep in mind that students who “just want to play drum set” may be better off taking private drum set lessons. They will not learn to play drum set in band. For students up for the challenge, playing percussion is a very unique and rewarding experience!

Quick Troubleshooting Guide:

My child has asthma. What instruments would be good choices?

Percussion Clarinet Alto Sax Trumpet French Horn
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Depending on the severity and triggers, many students with asthma have been successful on every band instrument. These suggestions are some of the safest choices because they require the least amount of or least sustained air.

My child has a cleft lip. What instruments would be good choices?

Percussion Clarinet Saxophone

Some students have had success with instruments other than these, but these are recommended options.

My child has a cleft pallet. What instruments would be good choices?

If your child’s mouth has an air passageway through the pallet and into the nose, it is likely he/she will not be able to produce a characteristic sound on a wind instrument because the air pressure inside the mouth cannot be sustained properly. The only recommended band instrument is **Percussion**. Or, have you considered a string instrument?

I still need help deciding. What should I do?

I would be happy to talk with you to discuss the choices further. Email is the best way to contact me kclark@sau29.org. Or, you may call me at Jonathan Daniels School at 352-8012.