

Philharmonic or Fun?

Stevenson High School's students come from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. This year, the school will include a new orchestra as part of its music program. The orchestra will be the only opportunity at the school for students to play an instrument in an ensemble. The new program has broad support at the school, yet a disagreement arises about how orchestra members should be chosen.

The school principal, Mr. Rooney wants to require that students pass an audition to join the orchestra. This, he argues, will ensure that the orchestra will be composed of students who are the best musicians. Given the school's string of losses on the athletic fields, Mr. Rooney hopes that a skilled orchestra may win competitions and enhance the school's prestige. The music teacher spearheading this new program, Mr. Murphy disagrees. He sees the orchestra as a way to build community around a shared appreciation for music. He wants to open orchestra seats to any student interested in music. To bolster his argument, he cites several studies showing that students who study music and learn an instrument get better grades in school and develop better social skills.

Parents and students are evenly divided about which approach to take. Some want the process to be competitive so that students with musical ability will be able play at a higher level. They hope this experience will provide a valuable opportunity for orchestra members and perhaps enable them to secure scholarships. Tryouts for school sports teams are the norm, they argue, and a musical group should use the same process. Others want an orchestra that welcomes interested beginners. This is particularly important, they argue, for students whose families have not been able to afford private lessons. If only those who are already talented can join the orchestra, it would highlight the socio-economic differences in the school community rather than unite it.

In the spirit of compromise, a group of parents petitions the school to create two orchestras: one for advanced students that requires auditions and one for beginners. Budget and scheduling constraints, however, will not permit Stevenson to support more than one orchestra. The school board must decide how to proceed given these financial realities.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is it for the greater good of the student body to focus on excellence or inclusivity?

2. How should we weigh the prestige of a school and the benefits it brings to a whole community against the opportunities extended to individual students?
3. Should we think about athletic teams and musical ensembles differently when it comes to competition?
4. Can auditions ever be truly fair?

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