



# Music Without Borders

Making Travel Meaningful and Accessible to Low-Income Families

---

**Felipe Morales-Torres**

Ohio Music Education Association

2017 Professional Development Conference

Saturday, February 4, 2017

## Overview

Music teachers serving less privileged communities are familiar with the barrier of cost. Families of limited means often cannot afford the traditional staples of successful music programs: quality equipment, private lessons, summer camps, competitions, and especially school music trips. In the quest for accessibility, many group travel plans begin and end with the goal of making the opportunity as inexpensive as possible, without considering how the cultural relevance of the itinerary may also help or hinder the goal of engaging as many students as possible.

This case study offers an alternative approach to planning and executing ensemble travel in a way that maximizes impact for disadvantaged communities.

# PLANNING RESPONSIVELY

There are many popular and successful models for school music trips, ranging from European performance tours to film scoring workshops at Disney World or quick jaunts to the local symphony. Each varies in content, scope, cost, and appeal. What is most important, however, is that the format we choose is appropriate for *our specific students*.

---

**Responsive design** is a process that allows environmental measurements to affect a product's form and function. Consider how a website might appear differently depending on the type of device used to view it, or how eyeglass lenses can adjust their tint to counteract glare. In both cases, the product was designed to react to its environment, making the user experience much more practical and enjoyable.

We can apply this process to travel planning by asking a series of **guiding questions** even before selecting a destination:

1. Why travel? (Director Perspective)
  2. Who are we?
  3. What do we need?
  4. What do we want?
  5. Why travel? (Community Perspective)
  6. Where should we go?
- 

## WHY TRAVEL? (DIRECTOR PERSPECTIVE)

This first question helps to clarify our motives as music directors. In *Music Education at a Crossroads: Realizing the Goal of Music for All*, the National Association for Music Education advocates that "trips by school music organizations should be justified on the basis of their educational value to students." An informal, online survey of music teachers revealed varying **motives for traveling with ensembles**:

- Festivals and Competitions
- College Clinics and Adjudications
- New Audiences, New Venues
- Recruitment / Incentive Tool

- Keep up with BAND!
- “They did it before I got here.” (Tradition)
- Unique Life Experience

---

The next three questions serve as an entry point to data analysis. While we are aware that our community is financially disadvantaged, it is important to understand both the objective and anecdotal realities of these circumstances. We also need to determine the personal, social, and academic values of the stakeholders in our school community.

### WHO ARE WE?

This question leads us to a two-part exercise.

First, we should research the household demographics of our school district to confirm or refine what we know. **Economic data** can help set parameters for our trip’s total cost, payment structures, and fundraising goals that are tailored to local needs. **Ethnic distribution** can illuminate cultural references and interests, as well as practical needs.

#### Data Points & Applications

Median household income	Helps understand average family budget.
Household size/type	Weigh median income against number of people to understand expendible income. Single parent homes may need flexibility.
Free/Reduced lunch enrollments	Percentage of families dealing with severe income limits ( $\leq$ \$30,000) will influence fundraising needs and payment formats.
Race and Ethnicity	Illuminates cultural references, interests, and representation.
Languages	Influences communication needs and perhaps travel destination/content.

**It is important to remember that the cost and scope of school trips impacts whole families, so research should include statistics for the entire school district, and in particular households with children up to 18 years old.**

The second answer to this question involves **school culture** and socio-academic expectations. Does our district have a philosophy or mission that can inform our travel decisions? Are there core values or practices we can incorporate? On a philosophical level, our travel plans should support these larger objectives, but seasoned music teachers also understand the practical value of appealing to administrators’ visions.

Incorporating these elements helps garner appreciation and support for our travel experience and its accompanying needs.

### WHAT DO WE NEED? WHAT DO WE WANT?

Pose these questions to the trip stakeholders: students, families, and district administrators. By surveying these three groups, we can gain insight into their priorities and align our plans accordingly. Consider the method for gathering this information and how it may vary between target groups. Students may appreciate personal conversations, whereas parents and administrators may find it more convenient or official to answer a brief survey. Whatever the format, we should summarize the most common responses:

#### Examples of NEEDS

**Students** – Free time, fun, educational activities, variety

**Families** – Safe, affordable, educational, fun, somewhere different

**Administrators** – Educational, global, unobtrusive to schedule, minimum risk

#### Examples of WANTS

**Students** – “No curfew!” (Read: free time)

**Families** – Different culture, develop independence, something we can’t provide

**Administrators** - Inspire/empower students to further their learning

**Ask clarifying questions as needed!**

**For example, what dollar amount qualifies as “affordable,”  
or what safety requirements are required by the school?**

---

### WHY TRAVEL? WHERE DO WE GO?

Sometimes parents or guardians will provide more insight than we would have discovered through our research:

“What we want for our children is that they have an experience we never had for ourselves; that they learn not only academic content, but also life skills; that they broaden their worldview and start thinking about new things; **and that they come back a better person than when they left.**”

*A Super Well-Spoken Mom*

Compiling this data and feedback helps to see where interests and needs overlap, which translates to a list of criteria or targets that we should be consulting at all times as we make travel decisions. The destination and activities we choose should meet

most--*better yet, all*--of these. When stakeholders feel we have listened and responded to their feedback, we gain a deeper level of trust and commitment to participate.

# PROVIDING ACCESS

When serving low-income communities, a truly accessible travel experience requires more than a low ticket price. The trip must be both **approachable** and **attainable** in order to be successful. More important, however, is our involvement in ensuring these two characteristics are present from start to finish.

---

## COMFORT & APPEAL

We, ourselves, must be comfortable in order for the experience to succeed. (Think of aircraft emergency procedures: adults should put their oxygen mask on before helping children.) If we aren't, students and families will sense our unease and may be less willing themselves to test their comfort zones. Some strategies for increasing comfort include:

- **Choose a familiar destination.** Insider knowledge will help navigate obstacles and could lead to deals or partnerships that benefit students. Likewise, a destination with broad appeal will boost participation.
- **Do extensive research.** Consult travel guides or personal contacts who can provide suggestions or feedback concerning the itinerary.
- **Track current and regional events.** Be aware of factors that may influence family decisions. Avoid destinations with political, medical, or safety concerns.

Once we have some options in mind, **confirm expected reactions** with trusted students and guardians. Discussing every possibility in the classroom may cause unnecessary excitement or disappointment. Instead, identify students and guardians who are representative of various subgroups (e.g. age, ethnicity, affluence) who can provide some candid feedback via personal conversations.

---

## RELEVANCE & COGENCY

As we finalize our destination and beginning planning activities, consult the check-list of needs and wants to make sure all targets are being met. Likewise, it is important to articulate learning objectives and explain how the itinerary will meet them. Having followed the guiding questions for responsive planning, we are also able to develop a package that is inherently meaningful to our community.

Once this information is in hand, **host a travel orientation**. An in-person meeting allows us to project our enthusiasm and confidence, while providing families the opportunity to ask questions. This meeting should take place sooner than later so that families have as much time as possible to make commitments. **It is ok to present a draft** as long as plans are remaining flexible in order to meet educational or financial goals, not because we are unprepared.

The most important component of a travel orientation is the **call to action**. Fundraising will play a major role in making the opportunity attainable for low-income communities, therefore we should emphasize the importance of ALL students participating.

---

## COST

If we are constantly adjusting to meet our families' needs, we will have two components to the total cost, **starting cost** (the absolute maximum) and **target cost** (an ideal minimum).

We can get a head start on reducing the starting cost by employing some simple strategies:

- **Determine essential services.** Can we plan the entire trip ourselves, or do we need assistance to book transportation or collect payments? Consult with other teachers who have traveled, as well as administrative assistants who may have handled the process before. The less we have to outsource, the lower the overhead cost.
- **Shop around for travel companies and let them know!** These businesses will offer competitive pricing, particularly for extended itineraries, which stand to earn them more profit.
- **Research alternative activities.** Plan multiple options to meet each learning target or community need. As fundraising results begin to come in, we can adjust the final itinerary to help reduce costs as needed. (E.g. instead of paying to attend a concert, perhaps the group could observe a rehearsal.)

## FUNDRAISING

The most important component to fundraising is to **know the policies**. In Ohio, for example, students are no longer to benefit directly from fundraising; profits must be divided equally across all students participating. Consult the district treasurer to obtain the most accurate information. Other tips include:

- **Differentiate from competitors.** Avoid duplicating other groups' fundraising, both to maximize profit and avoid conflict.

- **Mimize overhead.** Fundraisers that require the school to make a purchase upfront are typically less successful. Aim for programs that offer 50%+ profit.
- **Consider potential earning vs. individual effort.** Students and families are busy; avoid planning too many “difficult” fundraisers. Create a mix of offerings that vary student involvement. Spiritwear sales, for example, can be lucrative and only involve the teaching staff to advertise products. Do try to plan one large-scale effort with high earning potential.
- **Write to foundations; apply for grants.** The information collected in the responsive planning process makes for excellent rationale in these applications.
- **Seek out philanthropists.** Ask known donors or more affluent individuals for help with small, important, feel-good goals rather than an open call for donations. They may be more willing to donate \$250 knowing it sponsors a whole meal. Be sure to follow up with thank-you letters from students and documentation for tax deductions as appropriate.
- **Encourage local donations and sponsorships.** Reach out to businesses near the school and provide opportunities for community members to contribute. Set up a collection at concerts, or include an optional donation line on t-shirt order forms.
- **Use class time.** Make it easy for students to participate in fundraising by scheduling opportunities during class. Phone drives work well for this.

## LOGISTICS

**Avoid passing down costs to families!** Director expenses and other requirements should be paid by the school district, otherwise the cost of our room and board will be split up and embedded into the per-student cost. If the district requires overnight security, a nurse on board, or any other logistical details, push for these expenses to be covered as well so that the burden can be lifted from families.

Whenever possible, we should opt for the free option. Consult the list of needs-wants to determine if any can be met without purchasing something. By choosing a hotel near walkable attractions, for example, we can provide students with the opportunity for free time and meet the need of developing independence without expense. If bonding is a priority and students have requested a later curfew, consider hosting group activities before bed at the hotel.

## PAYMENT STRUCTURES

Families with limited income will need as much time as possible to manage payments. It is important to publish a schedule and establish some meetings or reminders to help stay on track. Take care to vary communication methods so that all families are receiving information, regardless of internet or phone access, and avoid overwhelming guardians. If a family is struggling to make payments, approach them personally and with an open mind rather than sending general communications.

In order to cover larger costs that often occur early on (e.g. hotel deposit), **schedule payments in decreasing size**. This has the added benefit of alleviating stress during near departure, when families may also need to purchase items or provide spending cash for their children to have during the trip.

#### **SAMPLE PAYMENT SCHEDULE**

<b>TARGET COST</b>	<b>\$750</b>
Deposit Payment	(\$250)
Payment 2	(\$150)
Payment 3	(\$75)
Payment 4	(\$75)
Final Payment	TBD

A highly motivating strategy is to use a **TBD final payment** based on the target cost. This encourages students and families to participate in fundraising so that the final payment can be zero! In the example above, fundraising (including donations, sponsorships) would have to total \$200 per student in order to meet the goal.

---

#### **FLEXIBILITY & COMPASSION**

The needs of low-income families vary widely, therefore individual situations should be addressed with individual attention. Students and families will have many questions, many of which begin with "Can I just..." **The answer should always be yes, unless it is legitimately impossible.** Before admitting defeat, consider whether the school district or boosters group can assist somehow.

Above all, remain calm and open minded when communicating with stakeholders. A common complaint from music directors is that families seem to prioritize certain commodities over what we perceive as more important responsibilities. Only in very few cases will this be true negligence. Instead, most of these behaviors are motivated by the poverty mindset, which seeks to escape the depressing and constrictive limitations of income. A brilliant illustration of this can be found in a dialogue from Netflix's globally minded hit series *Sense8*:

Woman - "Can I ask you a question? In India, I have visited families in slums and seen large TVs like this. I never understood. They have no furniture, but this enormous, expensive device."

Man - "That's easy. A bed makes it more comfortable to sleep, but when you wake up you are still in the ghetto. A TV makes it more comfortable to live and helps you escape."

# SUSTAINING IMPACT

In order for families of limited means to make the significant investment that is a school music trip, we must ensure that the experience has both immediate and lasting impact for their children.

---

## IMMERSION LEARNING MODEL

Tourism allows outsiders to admire a different culture, whereas participation allows them to understand its value. Immersion experiences are designed to include a variety of activities to target content, and we know from **Gardner's Multiple Intelligences** research that this maximizes learning and access. Here are some tips to generate an immersive itinerary:

- **Limit lecture-based tours.**
- **Plan for physical activity and collaboration.**
- **Allow for free exploration.**
- **Ensure crossover between activities.**

**Authentic cultural experiences** should go beyond simulations by incorporating primary sources and allowing for real-world applications. In project-based learning, activities should push students to advocate for causes, improve existing situations, serve a particular need, create an original product, or express a personal viewpoint.

So how do we incorporate that into travel? Depending on the itinerary, we can make programing choices that correlate with our focus, such as a program of original Latin American music if visiting a Hispanic region, or bluegrass ensembles if visiting the Southern US.

---

## PEER PARTNERSHIP

One very valuable travel activity involves peer-to-peer creative exchange. Reach out to local schools, outreach organizations, and cultural institutions for introductions to local programs who may be interested in collaborating. Formats can vary depending on each organizations schedule, ability, and needs:

- **Site visit**

- **Performance exchange**
- **Peer mentorship**
- **Side-by-side concert**

An important component of peer partnerships is that directors must collaborate to facilitate relationships between students. Plan activities or ice-breakers that encourage interaction and highlight shared experiences. This will ensure that the environment is more comfortable and that the learning experience is more effective.

It is hard to measure the value of a peer partnership, but many teachers advocate for its socio-personal impact:

“When they meet others and work alongside them, they realize they are just as capable, just as deserving, and have the same hopes and dreams and fears as everyone else. The fear of failure is replaced with determination and purpose. **They start to believe in the possibility of what could be.**”

*A Super Well-Spoken Teacher (Bridget)*

---

## ADVOCACY

Every travel opportunity offers the chance to generate excitement and support for the arts, which we understand are of great importance in disadvantaged communities.

**Social media** is a great tool for students to keep in touch with parents while on the road. It allows them to share their learning and excitement, and communities in turn can spread the good news. Encourage students to use specific hashtags or pages for sharing information so that media can be collected once the trip is complete.

**Local news sources** will gladly share our story as well, especially if we make it easy for them. Write a press release before and after the trip; be sure to include photos and videos. Consider sharing this information with sources within the school district, as well as regional and national newsdesks. It’s impossible to say what will catch an outlet’s eye!

Once everyone is home safe, it is critical to **provide a report for district leaders**. Request to speak about the experience at the next board meeting, and invite students and families who participated to be cheerleaders. Demonstrating the impact of the experience may open doors for additional support in future endeavors.

---

## LEARNING EXTENSIONS

As in all teaching, meaningful follow-up can galvanize learning. Some successful ideas include:

- **Writing letters to peer partners.** Students can reflect on their time together and express what they learned or admired about the event.
  - **Create presentations for related classes.** Consider what other students can learn through the ensemble's experience and reach out to teachers so students can share. (This is another great advocacy tool!)
  - **Record multimedia diaries.** Make time for students to share photos, videos, and other memorabilia from their journey.
  - **Continue collaborations** with peer partners. Skype a rehearsal and provide feedback for each other!
  - **Replicate the experience at home.** Make sure to perform the touring program or share activity products with families who didn't tag along.
- 

## DO IT AGAIN

The best way to guarantee impact is to **do it again**. Students in low-income households will have limited opportunities to travel, so why not try to provide an accessible, meaningful one as many times as possible? Once we have achieved one successful trip, we can repeat our responsive planning process. Gather feedback, analyze the trip's effectiveness, collect artifacts, and compile all these items into resources that can help apply for larger grants or sponsorships.

# RESOURCES

---

## HOUSEHOLD DEMOGRAPHICS

- [www.public-schools.startclass.com](http://www.public-schools.startclass.com)
  - [www.point2homes.com](http://www.point2homes.com)
  - [www.statisticalatlas.com](http://www.statisticalatlas.com)
- 

## FUNDRAISING & SPONSORSHIPS

- [www.pearup.com](http://www.pearup.com)
  - <https://blog.fundly.com/fundraising-ideas-for-trips-and-adventures/>
- 

## PLANNING

- **Music Education at a Crossroads (MENC)**  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=0T2\\_AAAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books?id=0T2_AAAAQBAJ)
  - <http://sbomagazine.com/resources/travel-festivals/4470-64planning-the-best-trip-for-your-band-or-orchestra.html>
  - <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/music-trips-abroad-is-the-cost-worth-the-value/>
- 

## IMPACT OF TRAVEL ON LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

- <http://www.apmreports.org/story/2016/10/07/schools-low-income-students-travel-abroad>
  - <http://hechingerreport.org/study-abroad-becomes-crucial-low-income-students-go/>
- 

## CONTACT THE AUTHOR

### **Felipe Morales-Torres**

Director of Orchestras, Winton Woods City Schools

[www.felipemoralestorres.com](http://www.felipemoralestorres.com)

[felipe.moralestorres@gmail.com](mailto:felipe.moralestorres@gmail.com)