

The All-School Sing

by Peter Amidon

Every all-school sing I've seen has been unique, reflecting the personality of the teachers leading the sing, the music teacher, the principal, and the students, and the size of the school, the space where the sing is held, and the frequency of the sing. Let us describe a few of the Vermont public school sings I have experienced over the last 20 years:

- **Townshend Elementary;** K-6, about 100 students, Townshend, VT: When Townshend found themselves without a music teacher in 1983, some of the parents and teachers started singing with the students every day. As the children came off the playground first thing in the morning they came in through the front door and up the stairs on the left and the right. The adult leaders wrote out songs on oak tag, often one sheet for each verse of a song, and held them up, while a parent who could play piano accompanied. When Mary Cay Brass started teaching music there in 1984 she found a school transformed by singing. Singing was as essential as reading and writing and eating, and the school sounded like a children's chorus. As a matter of fact they have put out a couple of tapes of their singing, which are great resources for all-school sing songs. They still sing every day.

- **Green Street School;** K-4, about 250 students, Brattleboro, VT: Townshend school students visited Green Street School some years ago and sang for them, inspiring the teachers of Green Street School to start their own weekly all-school sings. The sing starts with the principal holding up the words to the national anthem as all stand and sing, then they sit down and two teachers hold up words to songs selected by the music teacher, who accompanies them on piano. The current music teacher leads a punchy, fast paced sing that often incorporates themes and surprises like a visit from Santa in December and teachers dressing up and dancing to some of the children's favorite songs.

- **Marion Wilder School;** K-6, 300-400 students, Norwich VT: The Wilder School has had a weekly event called Rep (I think short for repertory) held faithfully every Thursday afternoon to which the public is also invited. The music teacher Mary Ann Wilde starts and ends with a song for all; all the other performances are created and performed by the students. They have to let Mary Ann review the performances first, and she coordinates the whole thing. Performances might be the acting out of the beginning of a favorite book, "...and you'll have to read it to learn the ending.", or a performance of student instrumentalists or singers.

- **Molly Stark School;** K-6, 300 or so students, Bennington, VT: Molly Stark starts each week with an all-school sing Monday morning. A couple of the classroom teachers lead the singing along with the music teacher; one of the classroom teachers plays

guitar and mandolin to accompany the singing. The principal plays a central role in the planning and leading of this event, which includes the giving out of awards, other important messages, and the celebrating of birthdays on the first Monday of each month.

- **Academy School;** K-6, 360 students, Brattleboro, VT: Every Wednesday morning all of the students and staff gather for singing here, along with a lot of parents and their younger children sitting in chairs in the back. Songs are written out on large (about 4 feet square) pieces of paper that are taped, one on top of the other, to a big portable blackboard. They are all arranged before the sing starts. The paper is from big rolls donated by area paper or book publishing companies. The music teacher along with a parent and the band teacher play tunes as students come in. Then there is 20-25 minutes of singing coordinated and led by the music teacher, with some of the songs being led by other teachers, parents, or students. Everyone leaves while singing a final song.

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All of these schools have found this regular coming together of students and teachers to have a strong positive impact on the school community. Other elements that are often brought into the all-school sing include:

- Recognizing special days and important events in the world and the community. This might be in the form of a special longer assembly with a mix of performances and all-school singing.
- A forum for special guests who are at school.
- A place for the principal to address important issues to the school community. This can be as simple as acknowledging that everyone is excited about the upcoming December break or welcoming everyone back after a break, or dealing with a crisis in the school community.
- A place for student performances, which sometimes include the participation of the school community. For example, a group of students might have made up a dance to a song sung by the rest of the school. And don't forget about teacher or parent performances.

In our leading all-school sings at Academy School, Mary Alice and I have found that the singing enthusiasm has its own natural cycle of ups and downs, and that when the

singing gets into a slump we have to think about what to do to spark it up again. Some of the things we've done include:

- Doing singing games where everyone stands up, clapping and moving with the singing (like in the singing game *Head & Shoulders* from our collection *Jump Jim Joe*).
- Teaching songs slowly, maybe even one verse a week.
- Repeating songs alot.
- Doing more unaccompanied singing, and having the children sing occasionally without any adults singing (this is one of my favorites).
- Having individual children lead songs.
- Having teachers and/or parents lead their favorite (often silly) songs or singing games. Some of the best are ones they knew as children.
- Having a class learn a new song and then introduce it to the school.

The main rule of thumb is to just do what works for your school, and experiment! Also, get alot of people involved in the leading of songs; teachers, parents and kids.

A successful, sustained all-school-sing can have a profound effect on the spirit and culture of a school.

-Peter & Mary Alice

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