

ALL SCHOOL SING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Someone sent me a note asking some great questions about all-school sings. Here are her questions and my answers.

-Peter Amidon
802-257-1006
amidonpeter@gmail.com

I am planning on having a school sing along this year instead of the traditional Holiday concert, but am not sure how to structure or begin planning the event. I know this is something you do frequently, (and did frequently when you taught in the classroom) and wanted to see if you have any wisdom to share. If You Wouldn't t mind, I have some questions.....

How do I prepare the students? Do I teach them all the material first?

We think of a school sing as a community building event that can be wonderful whenever you do it, but increases in impact the more you do it. I think the best way to prepare the students is to prepare the school by, if possible, having one or two school sings ahead of time.

In our school sings we generally would introduce no more than one new song per sing. However we might also teach a 2nd verse to a song that, the previous week, they had learned the first verse of. So, yes, you should teach a lot of the material ahead of time, but it is nice, I think, to teach some new stuff, even if it is just more of a song you have already started them on, in the all school sing.

Should I use the traditional folk music I use in my classroom? Or are there songs that are more appropriate for this kind of event?

I think any songs you do in the classroom are probably great for all school songs. An all school sing is a way to develop a school culture and repertoire of songs. One of the great things about an all school sing is that, when you have a diverse age group in the all-school sing, say K-5, you get to do more sophisticated songs with the younger and simpler songs with the older children.

How do I transition from one song to the next? Is it hard to keep their attention during transitions?

If you know exactly what you are going to do then I would move quickly from one song to the next. Another way to keep their attention is to have you not be the only leader; you might have a student, or a whole class come up and lead a song.

It is inevitable that they will start chatting between songs. Sometimes the best approach is simply not to worry about this, especially if it is taking time to get a class of children up on the stage, or if you are switching from piano to guitar, or working on putting some words up. Just let them chat and then start singing. The singing itself usually brings them back to task.

Do you just sing songs? Or are there other things I can add into the sing along? (stories with music- the story scanned onto a power point?)

If you have a story with the music, I would recommend TELLING the story to introduce the song. Children love stories, and that is a great way to get them involved in the meat of the song. You can also add singing games, the kind where you just stand up, such as 'Head and Shoulders' from *Jump Jim Joe* or 'Gramma Moses' from *Down in the Valley*.

You can do rounds, and challenge the children to sustain the round by themselves, a cappella. A cappella singing is a nice contrast to bring into a song; we often finish a song like 'All I Really Need' by repeating the chorus a cappella.

Again, having other folks lead, other teachers, students, even parents, is quite dynamic and empowering for the whole school community.

You also might have parents, teachers, or students accompany some of the songs on whatever they play. We have a music teaching friend who sometimes brings in a pretty hot band made up of parents and teachers that can include guitar (sometimes electric), bass, drums, saxophone, etc. The band teacher can probably play by ear or at least be able to read charts for songs on a wind or brass instrument.

How do I seat the kids in the gym? In rows all facing forward etc....

Sitting on the floor in a bunch. We avoid aisles in the middle.

Do you use an overhead projector to show the words of the song, or do you make sure everyone knows the words?

We know folks who use overhead projectors. We always used paper taken from big rolls of paper that I got for free from a book printing company that we taped to a moveable chalkboard. We prepared for the sing by taping them, one over the other, so that when we finish a song, we take it off and there is the other song underneath.

You might also use oak tag that can be held up. We know a school where they only use oak tag and each song has maybe three sheets of oak tag. There are two teachers who, for the last 20 years, have had the jobs of holding up the oak tag lyrics while the music teacher leads the singing. One might hold up a sheet with the first verse, then the second one holds up the chorus, then the first one holds up the second verse, etc.

The overhead projector is another possibility if you are set up for that. We never used an overhead, but we know schools that do. One of the advantages of using paper or oak tag is that the children can look right at the singing leader as they stand right next to the words.

Although it might be nice once in a while to sing a song that does not have printed words in front of the children, we almost always had the printed words in front of the children, even for songs they knew well. It is a powerful reading experience, especially for the younger children, to see the words they are singing.

Would it be ok to invite parents to stand along the perimeters of the gym? Or maybe even join their child?

It would be great! to invite the parents. It could be up to them whether they join their child. I would imagine that it might be more likely that parents with younger children would be more likely to join them. In any case, having the parents come adds a lot to the event and, whether they join their children or not, means a lot to the children whose parents come and share in the experience. I always went to as many all school sings as I could in my son's school.

How long should the event last?

Short. If you are doing it on a regular basis, I would recommend 15 - 30 minutes. If it is a special one-time event it could be longer; but I do not think I would ever run it longer than 45 minutes.

Do you sing along on a microphone?

If you can do it without a microphone that would be great. We did an all-school sing with 300 children and never used a microphone, but then I can have a pretty big voice.

It is more intimate without a microphone. If you are using a microphone I would suggest using it for the talking but not the singing. You might try it both ways and see what works best. The short answer is, only use a microphone if you really have to. You might have a microphone set up so you can have the option of using it. It IS important that the children can hear you or whomever is talking or singing, but it is also great if, say, a child is leading a song, for the children to need to get quiet enough so they can hear that child leader. They will listen more carefully if that child is not using a microphone.

That being said, we have been to plenty of all school sings that use a microphone, especially for the talking.

I don't play the guitar, or banjo, but have an autoharp (which I know you said is hard to keep rhythmic sounding and I agree) and can play the piano. Would it be best to use one of those? Neither of these? Recordings?

I do not remember saying that an autoharp is hard to keep rhythmic sounding. I think an autoharp would be fine for accompanying some of the songs. I would also try some a cappella singing, especially for rounds.

We know a lot of schools that use recordings that children sing along with, but we find that quite unsatisfying. We have never used a recording in all of our all school sings. We think that the children and school will own the song and have the potential for a stronger emotional experience with the music if the school community folks are making the music themselves.

Any other advice on leading an event like this?

Get other folks: teachers, students, parents, involved in the planning and leading of the event. Delegate jobs (such as writing out the songs, setting up the mic. if you use one, leading particular songs).

Some all school sings use the time for announcements and awards. I know one weekly all school sing in New Hampshire that used to have announcements and awards, but the all school sing committee (three or four teachers who meet every week to plan each week's all school sing) realized that the announcements and awards were times when the children would get fidgety; they were making the experience less dynamic, and so they got rid of them and had the experience be almost completely musical. They alternate between the whole group singing together and individual and class musical performances. The one I went to there was a very young short kid who got up and performed on a harmonica. He really just blew in and out, but he did it with such gusto and charisma that he deservedly got a huge cheer at the end.

Sorry for bombarding you with so many questions! I think having a sing along sounds like so much fun! I really had to fight to get rid of the tradition concert. (I don't think having kids get up on stage to sing a couple holiday songs reflects my curriculum very much.) I just want to make sure I do everything right! :)

I am going to reiterate here that a really great way to prepare yourself, your students and staff, and the whold school community for such an event would be to have an all school sing before the actual event. If you can't get the whole school, at least do it with a few combined classes. Then the school will see what a great event this is, and you'll get to practice and find out what works and what doesn't work for you.

All the above reflect my personal biases, but I thinkthe most important thing is that the event be tailored to you and your school community. Set it up in such a way that you HAVE A GOOD TIME!