Hosting a Talent Show

project description

This area contains information about hosting an all-school talent show.

guiding principles

Different schools have different plans for how to use a day before break. Rather than spending the day watching movies or with free time on computers, I felt it was a good goal for a school to do something the kids couldn't do for themselves at home.

Our school chose to hold a talent show on the morning before break. 'Morning' definitely doesn't sound as glamorous as 'afternoon' or 'evening', but running the show in the morning enabled every kid to attend and gave us a cushion if the show ran long or short.

The biggest guiding principle for our show was that if you wanted to be in the show, we worked really hard to get you in the show. It may not have been in the way you had originally intended, but we worked to get you in.

If you've worked in a middle school, you can imagine that this policy isn't always easy to follow. There's an idea about how when we are young, we all think of ourselves as great singers and dancers and artists ... and as we grow older, we gradually convince ourselves how that isn't true. Needless to say, middle schoolers are in various states of that convincing. That puts the show organizer on a tightrope between wanting to be supportive and wanting to protect the kid from doing something that might not go well and have a lasting impact.

As a result, even though I never said no to a kid, I might help him convince himself that he might prefer a no. Here are some ideas for that.

Have signups early. That gives time to think and rethink.

Have a mass tryout. Seeing other kids might give a taste of what's coming and his place in it.

Ask questions (carefully) like "Have you sung in front of people before?" or "Is this something you want to do in front of 600 people?"

If the borderline act was a singer, I often played guitar for the kid rather than having him use a karaoke track. That enabled us to change the key or leave out problem areas of the song. I would tell the kid I would work like Elvis' band; when the King went off the rails, the band would have to find a way to go off with him so it looked intentional.

We also sometimes asked borderline singers if we could have some goofy kids do a dance or a challenge during the song. The kid still got to sing in the show, but the focus was moved to another area.

Protecting those kids, both in the auditions and in the show, is a tough, but necessary job. Including them in some way gives the show a family vibe that people want to be a part of, instead of creating a high bar scares people away.

We would always start our show with something I would introduce as 'the worst act in the show'. It was usually some pretty popular kids doing an odd or lame act. (It became a badge of honor to be in this spot, so kids would often design something awful on purpose.) Before the act came out, I would tell the crowd that if they could be polite through this act, the rest of the show would be a breeze. That message was delivered in fun, but it was actually a hidden message about being kind to the kids who would need it later on.

If there were kids who were worried about performing, we generally tried to put them near the front of the lineup; that enabled them to avoid a long wait and being compared to other acts who were more polished. We'd also put larger groups, like the Jazz Band or Dance Team, relatively early in the show just so we didn't keep a crowd in the backstage area for longer than necessary.

We'd always look to alternate types of acts (singing / instrumentals / dance / comedy / miscellaneous) so we didn't get in a rut. Kids who had certain acts became recurring characters; instead of two minutes of jokes that may not be great, we'd schedule three thirty-second bursts.

We also had various staples that were part of the show each year, including the Rubik's Race, the Masked Singer, the Stage Crew Interview, and a cow costume that appeared in the show for twenty-five consecutive years.

All of this would build to the big finish, which was usually an incredibly talented kid. In years where that wasn't an available option, we substituted with some sort of boy-girl singing duet featuring great kids who were not necessarily incredibly talented but were coached to perform as if they were.

It was not uncommon to finish auditions without seeing something that could be a big finish. Once we knew where our holes were, I would look through my

class lists to find kids who I thought should get a personal invitation to perform in some way. We didn't always know what form that would take, but I wanted them to know that I thought people would love seeing them do something in the show.

It was always my goal to have the show look less like a show and more like a dinner party in Rob Petrie's living room ... if anyone still knows what that is. It was a lot of work each year, but it was a great way to finish a semester with kids giving gifts to each other either through their performance or through their acceptance.

shared documents

Talent Show To Do List
Talent Show Worksheet

Talent Show Consent and Release Form
Rubik's Race Announcement
Instructions for Masked Singer Contestants

Talent Show Rundown and Prop List (check both tabs)
Talent Show Cast List