

# 10 secrets of producing an all-school musical

By Cindy Ripley

There are a myriad of arguments for supporting arts in education, and one of the most compelling is that high-quality theater and music productions bring parents and the community into schools. School productions showcase the talents and creativity of both students and faculty, and they provide tangible evidence that resources spent on schools are a good investment.

In many districts, the highlight of every school year is the all-school musical – a production open to students of all ages in a given school.

If your school district doesn't have this tradition at the high school, middle school or even elementary school level, it should consider putting on a show. An all-school musical doesn't have to be Broadway quality to be a complete success in terms of giving students an opportunity to grow, giving audiences a rewarding experience and building good community relations.

I produced and directed more than 60 productions during 33 years as a vocal educator and music department chair of a school district in Cattaraugus County. As we approach the spring musical season, here are my top 10 tips for how a faculty advisor can survive and thrive during the process of producing an all-school musical. In David Letterman style, we'll start with number 10:

**10. Choose a musical that you feel passionately about.** If you don't connect with the show, how are you going to inspire your students? We are fortunate to have great American composers and lyricists who are creating quality musical theater materials for school-aged children. Consider the overall running length of the show and music keys appropriate for young voices before choosing your show. Also, the content of the musical should be age-appropriate.

**9. Get everyone on board.** Musicals build community and require collaboration. There are many ways to participate that do not require singing or dancing, such as contributing props, building sets or taking out an ad in the program. Make sure you build a network of support that includes your principal, administrators, secretaries, teachers, school board members, custodians, students and others.

**8. Be inclusive.** There is a place in a production for every child who wants to participate, either on or off the stage. It's always the kid who played a tree who later tells you that it was one of the most memorable experiences in his life. Musicals allows students with a wide range of other interests – art, the-



Photos courtesy of Cindy Ripley  
Teacher Cindy Ripley helps a student prepare for the stage. There is a role for every interested student in an all-school musical, Ripley says, including creating sets (right).

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ater, lighting, fashion and set design – to collaborate on a creative effort. Look for students, parents and colleagues who have strengths in areas that you may lack, like building sets, costumes, sound and lights. Remember, your show should be student-driven. Allow your students to develop their leadership abilities by putting them in charge of different aspects of your production: from finding all the props, to running the sound or light board and even leading dance rehearsals as a dance captain. Delegate with grace and humor.

**7. Be organized and plan ahead.** Build a timeline with your team of student leaders from start to finish, complete with realistic deadlines allowing for extra time for new challenges. Remember the importance of rituals and routines with students. Use technology to assist record-keeping and communication as well as publicity.

**6. Create a budget budget for your production and stick to it.** Consider line items like rights and royalties, marketing, as well as production

costs such as sets, costumes, lights, sound and props. If you know how much it's going to cost, you know how much to ask for when fundraising.

**5. Focus on storytelling.** One of the secrets of producing a great musical is focusing on telling the story. Use this litmus test on every production aspect: “Does it enhance the storytelling?” If not, it's not necessary. For example, do 35 hand-stitched, matching ball gowns enhance the storytelling? Maybe not. Does a sound system? Perhaps, because if the audience can't hear the show, the storytelling will suffer.

**4. Borrow and beg.** Your costumes, props, scenery and lighting should be imaginative rather than expensive or elaborate. Create set pieces that are generic and can be adjusted for future productions. Borrow what you can from attics and basements, and beg local merchants, and the local community theater, to support your production with in-kind donations of lumber, paint and materials.

**3. Make discoveries and enjoy.** Keep a journal throughout the rehearsal process and reflect on what works and the discoveries you make. Enjoy yourself. Mikhail Baryshnikov said, “The essence of all art is to have pleasure in giving pleasure.”

**2. Explain the journey.** Publicly display “the process” in your school and community buildings through bulletin boards and digital photos. Everyone enjoys the journey to the final product. Start planning for next year – it is easier to enlist the help of others when they taste the success. Celebrate and enjoy the “afterglow” with students, staff and community.

**1. Share the spotlight.** Make an effort to thank everyone who helped the production early and often. Then give yourself a pat on the back because you've managed to not only survive and thrive through the all-school musical, you've also enhanced the lives of everyone in your school and made a substantial difference in the community beyond your school grounds.

*One of the 39 educators named to USA Today's 2005 All Star Teacher Team, retired teacher Cindy Ripley is chief educational consultant for iTheatrics ([www.itheatrics.com](http://www.itheatrics.com)), a New York City-based company which provides professional development addressing all elements of musical theater production. She is active in development programs for school theater in Buffalo and New York City.*