

# THE IMEA ALL-STATE HIGH SCHOOL HANDBELL CHOIR

At the 2018 professional development conference, IMEA will debut the Indiana All-State High School Handbell Choir. As far as we can determine, this may be the first of its kind in the nation. Assisting IMEA will be the Handbell Musicians of America (HMA). HMA is the national organization representing handbell choirs and individual handbell ringers. The group was formerly known as the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR). The handbells most widely used in the United States are often referred to as “English handbells.” Many schools in our country have curricula that include handbells and hand chimes, and one focus area within the HMA is handbells in schools.

Five IMEA members are leading the committee to develop the IMEA All-State High School Handbell Choir:

- **Joyce Click**, director of choirs, North Central High School, Indianapolis
- **Jeff Doebler** (chair), director of music education & bands at Valparaiso University, and director of the handbell choirs at Trinity Lutheran Church and Lutheran Summer Music
- **Angela Hampton**, director of choirs and handbells, Floyd Central High School, Floyds Knobs;  
**Deb Hornaday**, sixth grade language arts teacher, Lincoln Middle School, Indianapolis;
- **David Stone**, choral/handbell/theatre arts director, Highland Hills Middle School, Georgetown;

Also providing input has been **Lindsey Fischer**, outgoing Indiana state chair for Handbell Musicians of America. The committee members represent a diverse use of handbells, with curricular and extra-curricular programs in high school, middle school, college, summer music camp, and church. All six handbell choir leaders developed a list of questions to allow IMEA members to learn about ways in which handbells are employed in music education. Various members of the committee then responded to the questions.

## 1. How did you develop the curriculum for your handbell choir program?

**Joyce** I use English Handbell Ringing Guidelines for levels and go through their skills, ringing techniques, and music theory.

**Angela** My curriculum comes from the music I am programming. We cover a mix of classical, folk, pop, jazz, and contemporary music.

**David** When I came to HHMS five years ago, there was no handbells curriculum in place. After speaking with the director at the high school that my students feed into, I realized a strong curriculum based on reading and technique was needed. Basic skills are imperative to the success of any handbell ensemble.



## 2. Because you have a handbell choir program, are more students involved in music at your school?

**Angela** Yes, most of my handbell students are not involved in anything else musically, so this program involves more than 50 students that wouldn't otherwise be in our music program.

**David** Yes, we ring a double choir of 4.5 octaves that allows us to have a seventh grade class of 24 beginning ringers and an advanced class of 24 eighth grade ringers.

**Joyce** The students who play in my after-school handbell ringing club are students who are generally in no music classes. They may ring handbells at their church or they may like music, but do not have room in their schedule. I have a full schedule of teaching choir, so I provide handbells as a once-a-week club.

**Jeff** Handbell choir at Valparaiso University is an extra-curricular organization. Some of the students are involved in other music groups, and some have handbells as their one ensemble.

## 3. How did you fund the initial purchase of handbells and/or hand chimes at your school?

**David** The handbells were originally purchased for every elementary school in the district: two octaves only. As the years went on, some schools purchased add-on bells to the original set. Several years ago, when elementary specialists were not certified, the high school and middle school teacher got all the bells from the schools. Since I have been at the middle school, I have raised funds to purchase add-ons to my set.

**Joyce** They were purchased years ago with bond issue funds.

**Angela** Handbells have been present in our school system for over 30 years. At one point, every elementary school in the district had handbells. When I came to Floyd Central, handbells were being used with grades seven and eight, but not at the high school. I began using their handbells for a high school class. Through a combination of donations from parents, PTO, and district funds, we were able to purchase a four-octave set specifically for the high school.

**Jeff** The first two octaves were purchased in the 1970s, then two more octaves in the 1980s, the fifth octave in the 1990s, and hand chimes after 2000. Each was funded through the regular budget and donations.

## 4. Large and small ensembles in band, choir, and orchestra have lots of opportunities for outside assessments with festivals sponsored by ISSMA, IMEA, and other organizations, as well as contracting clinicians to work with the groups. What kinds of outside evaluations do you use for your ensembles?

**Joyce** Because it is a club, I ask for student leadership. Many in the club have vast skills, while others do not, so the more advanced students tutor the beginners. I also have some experienced adults who ring with us from time to time. Our school principal and one of our assistant principals performed with us at the madrigal dinner last year.

**Angela** This is an area in which we are significantly lacking for handbells. I have taken groups to HMA events, but those are really not assessment-based. We need an event for our handbell choir programs that is similar to those run by the ISSMA (Indiana State School Music Association).

**David** There is none, so we give four school concerts a year, and also try to secure a few outside performances.

## 5. How does your handbell program fit into the school day?

**Angela** Students take handbell choir as a class. We meet one period every day, all year long. I teach two handbell classes each day.

**David** I have two 50-minute classes in my schedule each day.

**Joyce** Our handbell choir club meets one day a week after school.



**6. How are members selected for your handbell choir?**

**David** Most members are chosen from the general music classes. The students’ reading and rhythmic skills are evaluated by the general music teachers. They select about 36 students and rank them. We offer positions to the top 24. If a student in the top 24 does not want to participate, then they go to the next person on the list until all spots are taken.

**Joyce** Our club has between five and ten members. It is a “no cut” ensemble. All are welcome!

**Angela** All of our ringers participate in the feeder program. So many of them continue that I don’t have room to add students who have not come through that program.

**Jeff** We try to run two ensembles (and sometimes combine them). One group is advanced and the other focuses on those new to handbell ringing. In either case, though, students must understand how to count and subdivide rhythm.

**7. Have you had an unexpected “joy” that has come from your program?**

**Joyce** For me, it is a stress reliever. I ring with the group, so it is fun to be part of an ensemble. There is no grading, since it is a club. Some students only participate in handbells, and it brings them great joy.

**Angela** Involving students that would not be in the music program without handbells.

**David** Seeing students performing at a very high musical level is a joy to me.

**Jeff** As a music educator, I am always pleased for people to be making music for a lifetime.

**8. How do you add handbells to a high school or middle school program when you do not have time in your schedule for a separate class?**

**Joyce** Club works well!

**Angela** This has never been an issue at my school.

**David** It could be offered before or after school.

**9. What are ways to use handbells in the choral program?**

**Angela** Choir students can be taught how to ring in order to add handbells to a piece. My preference is to bring the handbell ringers to collaborate with the choir. We try to do this at least once each year.

**David** Handbells often accompany choral pieces.

**Joyce** We perform choir music with handbells and choir chimes as accompaniment. The handbells play for our choir programs and madrigal dinner.

**10. Does your handbell choir have its own concerts, or do they appear with other school ensembles?**

**David** Because of numbers in the choral program, we must have separate concerts. I also like the idea of handbells students having their own concerts so they can be highlighted. Separate concerts also allow them to play more repertoire each year.

**Joyce** We ring at our winter choir program and school madrigal dinners. We ring at a spring side-by-side concert. Hopefully, I will have a couple of ringers participate in Indiana’s first All-State Handbell Choir.

**Angela** Our ensembles have their own concerts, at least once per quarter. We also perform as part of a department-wide concert in December. On that concert, the advanced ringers perform a couple of pieces separately. We usually do at least one combined selection with all 50+ ringers, and play in the finale with the band, orchestra, and choir.

**Jeff** Our ensembles perform their own concerts, but also for worship services. They may play specific handbell compositions, add to hymn accompaniments, add to choral accompaniments, intone psalms, lead processions, etc. ●