Open Letter to the Mt Lebanon School Board and the Mt. Lebanon Community.

We are writing in response to the proposed changes to the high school band program, in particular, the reduction of the high school band director position to 50% and the reduction in field time for the Marching Band. The Mt. Lebanon Band Builders, the booster program that supports the band programs, would like to share more information about the entire “Lebo Bands” program. We hope you will take this into consideration as you make decisions for the coming school year.

Over the past 10 years the high school band teacher and marching band staff have integrated the wind ensemble and concert band high school classes with marching and enrichment bands to create a well-structured and award-winning program, “Lebo Bands”. Many of the students in Marching Band are also enrolled in Concert Band, Wind Ensemble, Orchestra, Percussion, Winter Guard, Jazz Band & Pep Band (and often in choir and the all-school musical too). This also extends to elementary and middle school as those band students perform at a football game with the band, and sometimes at the popular Bands in Review concert. The biography of the program displays a wide variety of performances by the talented students in the program:

> Proud of their long-standing tradition of marching and musical excellence, the Mt. Lebanon “Blue Devil” Marching Band is the largest co-curricular activity in the Mt. Lebanon School District. The Blue Devil Band is a seasoned traveler and has appeared in many televised events, such as the New York City St. Patrick’s Day Parade, San Diego Big Bay Balloon Parade, Chicago St. Patrick’s Day Parade, and multiple bowl games. The Blue Devil Marching Band is a repeat performer at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom. Locally, the Blue Devils have performed for the Pittsburgh Penguins, Pittsburgh Steelers, Pittsburgh Light-Up Night, Mt. Lebanon Light-Up Night, Mt. Lebanon Pumpkin Patch Parade, Bloomfield Citizen’s Council Halloween Parade, Kennywood Fall Fantasy Parade, and the South Hills Memorial Day Parade. In addition, the band participated in both the 2016 and 2017 Pittsburgh Penguins Stanley Cup Parades. The Blue Devil Marching Band performed at Walt Disney World in the spring of 2022, the Bands of America Mid-Atlantic Regional and Lincoln Memorial in the fall of 2022, and the Bands of America Toledo Regional and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2023. A highlight of the 2023 season was winning Class AAA at the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Marching Band Association Championships. This was achieved in only their third year participating in the competitive circuit. In addition, they most recently added a Pep Band to further support our varsity athletic teams throughout the school year.
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> Recently the Mt. Lebanon High School Wind Ensemble performed during the 2024 PMEA Conference in Erie. The Wind Ensemble also performed at the 2019 PMEA/NAfME Eastern Division Conference in Pittsburgh. This was a special accomplishment as more than 170 entries were submitted for evaluation. In 2018, the Wind Ensemble performed at the PMEA Annual In-Service Conference in Lancaster. Additional performances of the High School Wind Ensemble include the 2017 and 2012 Music For All National Festival in Indianapolis, Carnegie Hall in New York City in 2015, and the 2013 PMEA Annual In-Service Conference in Erie. The Wind Ensemble was also invited to perform at the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg in 2023 in honor of Music in Our Schools Month.

> The Mt. Lebanon Winter Guard program encompasses students from elementary through high school. This year we had over 40 students performing and competing. The teams compete in three circuits, the local Three Rivers Winter Ensemble Association (TRWEA), regional Tournament Indoor Association (TIA), and national Winter Guard International (WGI). In 2024, the Gold Guard placed second at TIA Atlantic Coast championships with their highest historical score for the program.

We believe that to maintain the depth and breadth of band offerings for Mt. Lebanon students, the high school requires an experienced band director. The program has been developed so that the co-curricular activity of marching band crosses over into the band class curriculum. Students perform their marching music in class so as to improve their marching show while honing their skills as concert performers. Many students also utilize the band room during lunch or study hall to practice for their performances and auditions for PMEA and universities. They also seek advice from the band director as they plan for their future in the fine arts.

We understand the enrollment in band classes has declined enough to only require a 50% teacher at the high school and ask that that teacher be the current band director. Ideally, the 50% high school band director could also serve as a 50% teacher at Mellon Middle School thus encouraging those students to continue on at the high school with the same teacher. The net effect of this teacher being shared between schools will then grow the high school program enough to return the band director at the high school to a 100% position.

The lack of field time for the marching band is another issue we must address. We would like to provide some history on this issue. Prior to the addition of the turfed upper field the band was given a three-hour stadium rehearsal block on Wednesday nights during the fall. With the addition of new athletic teams, the Wednesday rehearsal was sometimes moved to another day of the week.

When the community approached the board and administration about turfing the upper field, the band parents and students advocated along with the athletic parents with the understanding that this field would also be utilized by the marching band. For two years after that field was put into rotation the marching band had two nights of field time a week (3 hours each night), one night in the stadium and one night on the upper field. (We have historical calendars we can share if anyone is interested.) After Covid the time was reduced to sometimes two 3-hour blocks, sometimes one 3-hour block, sometimes a 3-hour block and a 90-minute block. There was no longer any consistency with days or times.

At times the band has been moved from a field in order for athletic teams to use it. We understand, especially with playoff scenarios that this is necessary, but we should be offered another slot to replace the one that was given up. A solution that has been offered is to allow the band to practice in the parking lot. This is not conducive to perfecting a show and is unsafe in a variety of ways. Would you ask the football, soccer, or field hockey teams to practice in the parking lot?

The band director and staff are more than willing to coordinate usage of the field with the athletic director and hope that the administration will support our efforts to have safe and fair usage of

the facilities. In addition, our award-winning Winter Guard program requires fair usage of the gym facilities for their rehearsals. Many don't understand what the program is and we wish more of the administration and board would attend a show and see the artistry and athletic ability that these students put into their shows. Our staff would be happy to share some videos so you can learn more about their performances too. They deserve the right to have their time to rehearse for their competitions just as our athletic teams do.

We appreciate all the tireless efforts Dr. Friez and the Board have undertaken to keep our schools open, and to prevent teacher furloughs. We all know the district's current financial state is challenging. This letter is not a request for more funding. The MLBB is happy to work with the District as much as possible to ensure band students are able to participate at a high level and excel in all band programs and classes as the District continues to work on budgeting issues. We only ask that you understand how the program works successfully and continue to set the program and our students up for success. Let's find common ground in realizing the importance of having a seasoned band director available to high school band students on a daily basis while also teaching and encouraging our middle school students to continue playing in high school.

We also hope that we can come to an agreement on the need for field time and gym time for our marching band and winter guard so that they can rehearse and perform to the best of their abilities just like our student athletes.

Thank you for listening to our concerns and we hope we can come to a favorable resolution that gives our students a chance to have the best experience with our Lebo Bands program.