

ALL IN

Developing Personal Connections with Students

By Renee Westlake

The key to success is you.

We all want success. Success for ourselves, our programs, and most of all, for our students.

We want to reach the highest graduation and attendance rates. We want to help our students have the highest in social, emotional and intellectual capacities and the highest levels of citizenship. We want our students to have a lifelong relationship with music. And we want them to have the grounding in music that will help them achieve in life.

For each of us to evolve from good music teachers to great music teachers, we need to build success on the pillars of trust: honesty, integrity, dignity, ethics, and sensitivity.

Developing quality relationships is the bridge to guarantee success.

This part of the ALL IN series shows how to get to know and to foster trust and leadership among your students, in order to enhance your music program.



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ALL IN: THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

What are those qualities found in the exemplar music educators that result in a life-changing experience for students? Through their curricula and practice teaching, collegiate programs do a good job of preparing teachers. The graduates of these programs understand the basics of pedagogy and musicianship. Yet, the great music educators have that “something extra” which goes beyond the material and concepts covered in school. It is that “essence” which empowers the Ninja music educator to have a profound impact on students, inspiring them to succeed not only in music but in life. Students who study music stay in school and demonstrate higher GRADUATION rates than those who do not. The evidence is broad and deep that music learning improves a student’s academic achievement. But the best programs even further strengthen test scores and grades, and lay the groundwork for success in professional life following school. Behind each and every outstanding program is an outstanding teacher. What is it then that stands apart the model music educator? Such an educator:

- 1) Believes in him/herself as someone who can make a difference
- 2) Is inspired, passionate, AND persuasive
- 3) Is primarily interested in the PEOPLE s/he is teaching and working with
- 4) Is able to make personal connections
- 5) Is a music missionary

How can I, as a music teacher, create, revive, or invigorate a program than can reach my students, help grow them, and increase the likelihood that they will graduate? I should:

- 1) Investigate and determine whom I am serving. I need to make a sensitive and strategic assessment to learn what music-making modalities already strongly live in the community. It is important to consider what kinds of music-making might engage or be interesting to this body of students. I must remain open to a variety of musical styles and genres.
- 2) Perform an honest self-evaluation of my unique special interests, biases, and skills. I should consider all possibilities, be willing to free myself from a particular approach to music-making and embrace what may already exist in the community.
- 3) Develop ethical but real personal connections with the students. It is personal relationships that allow me to grow as a human being and to succeed as a music teacher.
- 4) Develop relationships with colleagues, administrators, parents, and citizens in the community
- 5) Become a well-informed, compelling advocate for music educations, able to motivate and persuade stakeholders of the core value of the music program
- 6) Become a dynamic and determined fundraiser, equipped to generate significant resources to advance the programmatic mission.

DEVELOPING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS

Effective teachers make personal connections with their students. When cared for and valued as an individual, the student will respond accordingly. Every human being wishes to be seen as unique, important, and worthy. Teachers who instill this sense of self-worth create learning environments which enhance every student's passion for the study of music. Such an approach motivates students to higher levels of proficiency not only in music but in all endeavors. The teacher, then, is more than the academic expert. The teacher is, in fact, a role model and mentor. Acting as exemplars, successful educators develop their students as musicians and as leaders in the classroom as well in the school and community.

To be the most effective role model and mentor for your students, you can use a few simple techniques. First, you need to get to know your students. Then, throughout the year, you need to cultivate their trust and develop their leadership.

GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

1. Within the first day or two of school, ask your students to complete an information form. This will help you learn more about your students – particularly those who may be new to the music program. Create questions that you think would be of interest to your students. (You can use the following Student Information form for this purpose.)
2. Learn the names of your new students. Try to greet each of them by name as soon as possible.
3. Within the first week, give each student a 3 x 5 card on which to list goals for the school year. Tell students to put general goals on one side of the card and musical goals on the reverse side. Some students may want to perform in solo and ensemble festival, others just to improve their skills. Beginners may simply want to learn a specific instrument. The key is to engage the students in the learning process.
4. Within the first week, plan activities that will help students get to know each other. For example, pair off students in groups of two thereby creating a set of partnerships. Encourage students to learn as much as possible about their partners. Invite the students to introduce each other to the rest of the class. This activity will not only help the students to learn about their fellow classmates, but will also help the educator learn more about each student.

(*AFFIX MUSIC DEPARTMENT LOGO*)
STUDENT INFORMATION

Name

Street Address

City

State

Zip

Phone

Email

Name of Parent/Guardian

Home Phone

Email

Work Phone

Instrument

Favorite Performing Artist

Favorite Recording

Pastime/Hobbies

Favorite Sport

Favorite Team

Who do you admire most?

Why?

Describe the most rewarding experience you have ever had.

Answer either a) or b)

a) **NEW STUDENTS:** Why do you want to learn to play an instrument?

b) **RETURNING STUDENTS:** What do you enjoy most about participating in an ensemble?
Can you describe your most memorable performance experience to date? Use the back of
this form.

ESTABLISH TRUST:

1. Set and exemplify the standard of excellence. Unless students trust us, they can be unapproachable. “The best way to establish trust is by showing students respect in the form of meaningful, challenging, and rewarding classroom activities that are worthy of their best efforts. This means that the student must view the music educator as the academic expert.”¹ The teacher acts out the musical mission and in so doing ensures that the students strive for the same. High self-expectation inspires high levels of achievement among students. There is no substitute for assuring students that they possess the ability to grow beyond their OWN expectations. The best music educators are driven to help students realize their potentials.
2. Care about the well-being of your students. “Teaching flows from what an educator believes is the best way to teach a student. That belief is not demonstrated in mission statements and platitudes, but it is clearly visible in the way teachers set up and run their classrooms and in how they treat their students.”²
3. Respect students’ time. Music students are often involved in many inside-of and outside-of school activities. Set up your yearly calendar early on and share this information well in advance. When a conflict arises make a student- centered decision. Be alert to major events in the overall school calendar and schedule appropriately.
4. Acknowledge students accomplishments in a significant manner. (You can send the two-sided Student Acknowledgment card to parents or guardians.)
5. Be honest. Do not intimidate. Be consistent.

STUDENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT CARD

Side 1

Mozart Middle School
Music Department
1000 Haydn Lane
Hollywood, CA XXXXX

[Parent’s/Guardian’s address]

STUDENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT CARD

Side 2

*WE THOUGHT
YOU SHOULD KNOW!*

Date _____

Dear _____:

Sincerely,

Mr. Music Educator

CULTIVATE LEADERSHIP

1. Model what is expected from students because students mirror what they observe from their teachers.
2. Allow students to be involved in the decision-making. Effective mentors empower officers to provide monthly goals, decorate the classroom, organize the bulletin boards, etc. If there are no officers as yet, recruit individuals or “leader-type groups” to take on some of the above.
3. Establish a sense of service by helping others. While giving service, students learn to collaborate, to do something good for the community. This can be done through any number of community service projects. Students can organize food drives, provide peer tutoring, host a teacher appreciation luncheon, assemble care packages for servicemen and women, volunteer at a local hospital, etc.

4. Provide leadership opportunities

- Develop a formal program for students to take on leadership roles as part of the music course.
- Identify and encourage students with potential, students who show integrity, and students with a good work ethic. These students do not need to be the outgoing, charismatic or popular students. In fact, some of the “wallflowers” will bring new energy to your program with your recognition and guidance.
- Offer opportunities to foster leadership which include serving as section leaders, community service initiators, peer coaches, stage managers, usher coordinators and speakers at public events.
- Ensure that all students know the parameters for your leadership program.
- Invite leaders in the community to become involved in this program. Ask local musicians, other music staff, non-music staff, administrators (including your supervisor) and college music staff also to participate in the process.

¹Developing Students’ Trust: The Key to a Learning Partnership. Ben Johnson. Edutopia

²Ibid