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## Contents

### 24

**Celebrating and Elevating the Small-School Experience**

Educators in small schools share their perspectives and their joys about teaching music.

### 36

**Teacher to Teacher: Tips for Getting the School Year Off to a Great Start**

*Teaching Music* asks music educators from around the country to provide their top recommendations for preparing for a new school year.

### 42

**Professional Learning Communities**

PLCs are where teachers collaborate to benefit the students they serve.

### 44

**Let’s Put the Festive Back into Festivals**

Actionable strategies for coping with the drawbacks of large-group performance evaluations.
HAROLD ROSENBAUM:
‘MUSIC TEACHERS CHANGED MY LIFE’

DEPARTMENTS

6 MUSIC MOJO
Insights from 50 years of music-making with Harold Rosenbaum

58 COUNCIL CORNER
Commissioning New Music: “Soaring to New Heights” — A Composition by Kirk Vogel

62 TEACHER’S GIG BAG
A curated list of accessible choral selections (in multiple voicings) composed and/or arranged by people of color.

“
There is a synergy felt when the music education leadership from across the country gather each year.

MOVEMENTS

12 LESSONS
Case studies, lesson plans, and best practices

52 MUSIC ROOM
Products, technologies, services, and workshops

TOGETHER TOWARD TOMORROW:
2023 NATME NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HIGHLIGHTS

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Celebrating and Elevating the Small-School Experience

Educators in small schools share their perspectives and their joys about teaching music.

BY JOHN DONALDSON

What specific places come to mind for you when you think about small schools? What places are you imagining that you have not visited yet?

Every state in the United States has a large number of small schools and not just in rural areas. If you work in a small school, you may see some of your successes and challenges reflected in the experiences shared by the wonderful teachers in this article. If you are new to this topic, then perhaps this article will help turn places into faces.

Tom Muller, NAfME Northwest Division immediate past president, was the first chair and is a current member of the NAfME Small Schools Initiative Task Force. He helped spearhead a focus on small schools at the state, regional, and national levels starting when he was president of the Oregon Music Education Association. He notes, “After attending a small school roundtable, I felt that there was a strong need to better serve this community. During my travels throughout the vast states in the Northwest Division, I was impressed with the strength and resilience of teachers in small schools throughout the region but also by the many challenges they face including funding, scheduling, and lack of resources such as access for students to private teachers.”

NAfME’s Small Schools Initiative Task Force held a town hall on May 23, 2023, that drew 168 registrants. There was also a robust discussion on small schools at NAfME’s National Assembly in June. Look for a regular series of articles, resources, and town halls focused on small schools in the coming months and years.

What Is a Small School?

We asked more than a dozen experienced small-school music educators to define “small school.” Not surprisingly, given the thousands of unique contexts, there was no standard answer.

Melissa Jmaeff is a member of NAfME’s Small Schools Initiative Task Force and state advocacy chair for small schools for the Oregon Music Education Association. She teaches grades 6–12 band and choir at Sutherlin Middle School and Sutherlin High School in Sutherlin, Oregon. Of her district’s 1,300 students, about 70% qualify for free or reduced lunch, 5% are English language learners, 81% are white, and 19% are students of color.
Melissa Jmaeff defines small schools this way: “I consider small high schools to be 450 students or less. In our neck of the woods, that is classified as a small 4A school or below. However, this is not a hard-and-fast rule. In talking with other music educators, issues that are somewhat exclusive to small schools include being the only music teacher at your site and/or district, teaching multiple subject areas (both in music and outside of music), teaching at multiple sites, having multiple ages and/or multiple levels in one ensemble (“high school band,” “middle school choir,” etc.), and being at schools that do not offer multiple sections of the same classes, which makes scheduling a major challenge. Clearly, anyone facing these issues is not defined by school populations alone.”

Perhaps you know a small school when you experience it. Here are some of the small school descriptions we received from the teachers we interviewed:

- A small school district may combine K–8 or have only one or two buildings for PreK–12.
- Smaller schools often serve more rural, less-populated communities with a smaller tax base and relatively high dependence on a smaller number of industries.
- A small school is any school with a population under 400 students, often with only 1.5 teachers who teach a given subject.
- A small school is 200–400 students for grades 9–12.
- A small school is often the only school for those grades: one elementary school, one middle school, one high school.
- A small school has less than 1,000 students and limited access to opportunities outside of what the school offers.
- A small school often has just one teacher for each grade level in the elementary school. In the high school, students know each other, since many have been in the same class since kindergarten.

- A small school is a place where everyone in the community comes to the Saturday night basketball game. It’s a school where everyone lines the street to send a team off to their state championship while the bus is escorted by the fire and police departments.
- The high school may have 150–500 students total, and some districts may have 500 students total in the district.
- A small school’s average graduating class size is under 90 students.

Natasha Verhulst (Nekânekapowiahkiw) teaches K–5 general music at Keshena Primary School, a public school with 430 students in the Menominee Indian School District, Keshena, Menominee Reservation, Wisconsin, serving a population that is 91% Native American, 7% Hispanic, and 2% multiracial. She shares, “I grew up in a small school, and to me that always meant that I knew who everyone was in my school. Now, as a teacher in my tribal community, I see it as a place where everyone keeps an eye out for each other and on all of our children.”

“Working in a small school district is nice because the staff all get to know each other,” she continues. “You aren’t just a number to your administrators, and the community gets to know you as well. I get to choose my curriculum and materials because I’m the only music teacher in our elementary school. I tailor my teaching to my community through indigenous pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, so my students are engaged in music and love it. Because I have this connection with my students, when I go to community events, they run up and hug me and introduce me to their families. Their families can see my positive interaction with their child, and this helps with communication and gaining support for music in our district.”
Lance Jones, a member of NAfME Small Schools Initiative Task Force, is director of bands at West Branch Area School District in Morrisdale, Pennsylvania, a district with 900 total students across K—12. His roles include teaching 4th–12th-grade Instrumental music, 8th-grade general music, high school guitar elective, and a high school Music in Film elective. He defines small school this way: “Any setting in which the size of your school (in terms of facility and enrollment) limits your resources, in all of its forms, including but not limited to staff, budget, equipment, or scheduling.”

What Are Some Benefits of Teaching in a Small School?

The teachers interviewed and surveyed for this article clearly share a passion for their work. Here are a few of the insights they shared.

Kathi Hernandez is a music teacher serving all students in grades K–5 at Earlham Elementary School and Allila Elementary School, in Earlham, California, located in an agricultural area in the Central San Joaquin Valley. Her district’s student population is approximately 96% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 1% two or more races. “I feel the benefit is knowing your students and their personalities, along with knowing the community you serve,” she says. “While my students might come from another country and be placed into a classroom not really knowing the language, music gives them a chance to learn, have fun, be themselves, and build bridges to things they know. My students take education seriously. It makes me feel good to see them participating, even though they might not know much about note values or tempo.” She adds: “The community I serve are people who work hard, want something better for their children, and appreciate the opportunities we provide. One of my students speaks very little English, but she works so hard. At an awards event, I saw tears in the mom’s eyes, and she managed to thank me in English. It’s little things like this that make me proud of what music education can do for our students, and I’m happy to share my love of music with them.”

Here are more comments on the benefits of teaching in small schools:

- You have the opportunity to be your own feeder program and encourage and see growth in students at all levels of their music education, K–12.
- You can be an innovator (sometimes out of necessity); at larger schools, they might veto ideas at times for fear of “setting a precedent” for other schools at the same grade level.
- You have more freedom in what you teach and how you teach it, including designing and implementing a scope and sequence that works for you and your students.
- You can oversee the whole curriculum from K–12 and make adjustments and improvements as needed.
- There are endless opportunities for thinking outside of the box. You will always be engaged in creative problem-solving and teamwork.
- You get to try the things you want to do without having to plan with other band directors.
- In many ways you are your own boss, in charge of purchases, inventory, curriculum, libraries, spaces, and resources.

In a small school, there are endless opportunities for thinking outside of the box, creative problem-solving, and teamwork.
You have the ability to make immediate and meaningful impact on your students, district, and communities.

Small schools have a tight community. You really get to know all the kids and their families.

The enrichment opportunities are vast! Some teachers in small schools say administrators back every honor event they sign the kids up for.

Behavior is usually not an issue, and it is handled by the administration.

You get to know the kids’ families and can drum up support through siblings. When you need something, the owners of local businesses probably had a kid in your band program and will help sponsor.

You get to know all fellow staff members and how they manage their classrooms.

You make connections with all your students as well as with students you don’t have in class.

Small schools have less red tape and politics. It’s easier to build positive relationships with students.

There is a better opportunity to establish long-term relationships.

Teachers in small schools often live in the community and are part of the school district community.

Small schools often have enough instruments for all students to participate or share with other students.

Small schools have a warm, small-town feel.

Small school teachers often teach both middle and high school, so they get to see their students learn and grow for seven years.

The family environment is more prevalent, and people look out for each other. There seems to be less drama as well.

Small school teachers enjoy forging relationships between the high school musicians and the beginners.

Small school teachers teach students from start to finish and build a sustainable relationship.

Small schools offer community support, tradition, and collegiality.

Teachers know all the students, and you are familiar if not friends with their parents. Teachers get more involved by going to their students’ sporting events, Future Farmers of America, etc., and can personally congratulate them on their successes.

There are smaller class sizes.

It is a lower-stress job, and small towns are a beautiful place to live.

Teachers have opportunities to build a culture within music programs where students feel safe and heard, and is culturally responsive based in the context of the community.

Karen Gibbs is a retired music educator with 25 years of K–12 small-school teaching experience in rural Douglas County, Oregon. She has taught elementary and general music at levels K–8, choral music in grades 5–12, elementary band, elementary art, and high school drama. Gibbs notes, “The No. 1 advantage in a small-school setting is the ability to work within a multilevel community environment that integrates with the families in the area. The teacher becomes known multigenerationally, and that helps build your program as familiarity builds trust. The best-loved tradition and best annual high school choir fundraiser was the multigenerational Talent Show we hosted every year. Preschoolers sang their ABCs,
high school students sang songs they composed, and community members recited cowboy poetry ... all together. Elementary concerts were community events with 700 people coming out to watch.”

Myron Massey is the band director at Bunker Hill High School in Claremont, North Carolina, a rural area in the central part of the state. Most of the students at his school are white, but students of all backgrounds are represented in the school and in the band program. He says, “A small school is usually not as well-known, so the opportunity to have the program you want is much greater because you can try things without pressure. A lot of what I do are things the students haven’t really experienced before, so it’s been nice to expose them to various styles of music or travel opportunities for the first time and see their genuine excitement for learning. I was fortunate to have our jazz band selected to perform at our state music educators convention in 2019. The core group had been together since their freshman year. They encouraged each other to be their very best in every performance.”

Rich Tengowski is chair of NAfME’s Small Schools Initiative Task Force and president of NAfME’s North Central Division. Recently retired, he taught beginning band, middle and high school band, pep band, jazz ensemble, drumline, and secondary general music in the Kohler Public Schools in Kohler, Wisconsin. “Coming out of college, I always envisioned going to a big-school music program, but after teaching one year in a small school district, I quickly found that there is a special bond with my students, their families and the community that only exists in a smaller environment,” he says. “Over 36 years, I have never regretted staying in a small school.”

Tengowski notes that in a small school, you may be the musical or cultural center of the community and with that comes a responsibility for educating both students and adults. “The curriculum you design will influence your students’ education and impact your community’s cultural awareness,” he says. “Drawing upon the students’ needs and the interests of the community, you can create unique learning opportunities.”

Tengowski continues: “Students need high-quality music education regardless of school size. Some of the finest mentors whom I looked up to when I was a beginning teacher all taught in small schools. I often sought them out for ideas and guidance. Staying connected with others who taught in small schools was key to my longevity and success.”

Rachel Lake is music director at Ilwaco High School (275 students) in Ocean Beach School District (950 students), in Ilwaco, Washington, located on the Pacific Ocean. The nearest large grocery store is 45 minutes away. Everything they participate in (sports, music, festivals, etc.) involves at least a two-hour bus ride. About 70% of the students at her school are on free or reduced lunch, with many homeless students as well. About 20% of the student body is Hispanic. She teaches jazz band, concert band, vocal ensemble, mariachi (next year), popular music of the world, U.S. history (this year), marching and pep band, and drama, and she is junior class advisor (in charge of prom).

“There are tons of benefits to teaching in a small school such as getting to know all the students in your building and those students having more opportunities,” she says. “State-placing wrestlers can star in Shrek the Musical and play the baritone sax in jazz band. How many schools can say that? I also feel needed by my students. Some may only be going to school due to my classes. It is also a great place to raise your own children and know everything that they do!”
Laura Eberhardt is the districtwide band director (6th–12th grade) in Cimarron Municipal Schools, including the towns of Cimarron and Eagle Nest, New Mexico. The high school where she teaches has 70 students. Her two middle schools have 40 and 80 students, respectively. She travels 25 miles daily between these schools and is the only music teacher in the district. It is a mountainous area dependent on tourism with a good deal of snow in the winter and forest fires in the summer. The population is a mix of longtime Hispanic families and the children of transplants who fell in love with the area when visiting.

“When you are the only music teacher in a rural district and have built a high-quality program, you’re a rock star,” Eberhardt says. “You see parents and community members anytime you go to the store or a restaurant, and they always say hi or congratulations on the latest performance. You feel integral and important to the entire community, not just to the school or your music students. There is a strong sense of support overall and more engagement from families in their children’s education.”

Eberhardt says coming to a small school to teach saved her career. “I was burnt out after teaching in a larger district. I found my home in the mountains. I feel appreciated and rewarded for my hard work in a way I never felt before. I’m even on a first-name basis with the superintendent, a band dad who comes to all performances, often cooks for the band, and even drives the equipment trailer.”

What Are Some of the Challenges for Teachers in Small Schools?

Here are some common challenges shared by small-school music educators:

- Students are pulled in many directions. They are the athletes, musicians, members of clubs, and maybe even work on the family farm.
- Scheduling issues are very challenging across schools and within schools due to the number of single classes and the smaller student population.
- Depending on the location, there is a smaller number of potential participants to draw from, which impacts the repertoire and musical experiences available to the students.
- Funding is always an issue when you have a smaller tax base to support schools.
- The biggest challenge is usually money for your program to run efficiently and compensation for your work, especially in regard to extracurricular expectations outside of the contract.
- Sites are often far away. Teachers would love to take students to more events, concerts, and shows, but it turns into a very long day and late night on the bus, making it hard on everyone.
- Living in a small community is wonderful when you have a family but maybe not so wonderful if you are younger and single.
- Depending on your community, getting support from industry may be challenging.
- Getting buy-in from the community could be an issue depending on how relevant music/arts education is the area.
- Access to music education is an issue, including access to private lessons. There is a strong need for advocacy.
- You can be viewed as “less-than” by those in larger schools and districts.
- Depending on the state, you can be perceived as less competitive, not able to meet the same “standard” at the state level in assessments.
- Small-school kids in a rural setting lack the opportunities to observe other students in similar successful endeavors. Creating a vision of the end goal takes work.
- Being the only music teacher in a district is lonely. Creating a connection and brainstorming with teachers in other districts is crucial.
- Teachers can be undervalued by students, parents, the community, and even other staff members. Too often, “specialists” aren’t seen as professional educators.
- The biggest challenge is isolation. As the only music teacher, you may have to teach everything yourself. Likely, you won’t have an assistant to help a student who is behind or work with your beginners.
• You may miss bouncing ideas off of other music colleagues as the other teachers won’t always understand what you do.

• The closest repair and music shop could be hours away, so you have to carefully manage your materials and do repairs yourself.

Several teachers elaborated on these and other challenges. “A big challenge is finding qualified staff to cover course offerings,” states Karen Gibbs. “Job descriptions cover areas of expertise well beyond what most music teachers are trained to do. A friend currently teaches beginning, intermediate, and advanced band, choir, guitar, and K–6 elementary music … every day. That is a huge number of classes to be prepped for and to be equipped to teach effectively — not to mention the challenges of moving from building to building and keeping track of materials.”

Brett Keith is president-elect of the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association and a choir director/general music instructor at Northern Bedford County Middle/High School in Loysburg, Pennsylvania. His district has 436 elementary students, 178 middle school students, and 270 high school students. It is a rural school district where 49.5% of students qualify for Title I support (the elementary building is Title I schoolwide). “Many activities share the same students, so staff must be adaptable and flexible, support each other, and keep communication lines open. When that falters, the students are negatively
affected," he notes. “Scheduling end-of-the-day periods is complicated since those who participate in many sports are dismissed early for matches. Ensemble classes are difficult to make up when students are absent.”

Lance Jones adds that if you are the only teacher serving all of the students in the building or district, it can be overwhelming. “It is important to set tangible goals and a plan for achievement. Then, you need to share this plan with colleagues, administrators, and booster organizations so that they know how to help,” he says.

Melissa Jmaeff stresses the need for systemic changes. “Most music education majors enter college from large, suburban music programs with thousands of hours of observation under their belts and an idea of what ‘success’ looks like,” she says. “Many colleges and universities teach in a way that supports this narrow idea of success and does not provide a window into approaches other than large-ensemble music education.”

She continues: “These new teachers are often hired into small districts for which, through no fault of their own, they are unprepared. They wind up staying for a few years and then moving on to larger, more-familiar-feeling programs, perpetuating the narrative that small schools are stepping stones or worse. This high turnover rate is detrimental to music students and the school community in general. We need to look at how we recruit music teachers into the profession and what we teach preservice teachers so we better prepare them for the challenges as well as the amazing benefits of teaching in a small school.”

Challenges also build character and form lessons that last a lifetime. James Daugherty, NAfME Southern Division president, a member of NAfME’s Small School Initiative, arts education and digital learning specialist for Davidson County Schools in Lexington, North Carolina, is a passionate advocate for small schools. “As a product of an exceptionally small school and music program, I cannot underscore enough the value and importance of music in all schools — regardless of their demographics,” he says. “My high school band room was on top of an auto mechanics shop with ceilings lower than in most people’s homes. I could touch the ceiling with my sousaphone on my shoulder.

“What is always at the core of a small or rural school’s music program is a teacher who has the deepest compassion for sharing the art and craft of music-making with their students,” he continues. “These music teachers work magic to provide experiences and equitable opportunities for their students. So often they are in charge of multiple content area ensembles and are doing their best to grow them all simultaneously. My teacher definitely made sure that what we didn’t have didn’t impact what I could have.”

**Tips, Strategies, and Innovations for Supporting Small-School Music Educators**

There are many strategies and innovative ideas for supporting small schools at the national, regional, state, and local levels.

At NAfME’s Northwest Division Conference, held February 16–18, 2023, in Bellevue, Washington, and hosted by the Washington Music Educators Association, there was an excellent track of sessions focused on small schools led by Rachel Lake and others. Lake has led virtual peer-to-peer sessions for several years in Washington State. It started during the pandemic but has continued given the convenience of Zoom meetings in a state where it takes more than eight hours to drive from the Pacific Coast to Spokane on the eastern side.

Neil Swapp, executive director of the New Mexico Music Educators Association, describes how the association regularly hosts online town hall meetings for teachers in rural areas. They offer clinics at each conference specifically for rural teachers and make every effort to have at least two executive committee members who are currently teaching in rural areas. “One of our all-state ensembles (small school band) is only for students auditioning from small schools,” he points out. “Students attending small schools can either audition for small school band, or they can audition for one of the other two all-state bands with students from large schools. Students attending large schools may not audition for small school band.”
Johnathan Hamiel is president of the North Carolina Music Educators Association, a member of NAfME’s Professional Learning and Partnerships Committee and Equity Committee, and the K–12 arts education coordinator of Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. “As a product of a small rural music program, uplifting and supporting our small music education programs is extremely important to me,” he says. “Building on one of our research poster sessions last year — and thanks to the research and work of Tim Nowak, Daniel Johnson, Ann Marie Stanley, and Laura Doyle Black — I am very proud that our state is now offering an asynchronous online professional learning community for our rural general music educators K–8, providing a space for them to grow as professionals.”

Teachers interviewed for this article shared a variety of tips and strategies for success. Brett Keith emphasizes, “It is critical that we cultivate an environment of belonging, where students are welcomed, nurtured, and encouraged to grow. It helps them become mature and caring individuals, contributes to a greater society, promotes community, and builds a culture of expression and lifelong support through music.” He also recognizes, “Everywhere we go is a trip. My students love to get out of the school whenever possible so working toward an event is a good motivator.”

For teachers in Alaska, getting to events can be a major undertaking. A news story by Kris Capps from the April 27, 2022 edition of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner titled “Music programs collaborate to create a big sound,” highlighted the work of Candace and Darren Mudge, music educators who teach in small schools located south of Fairbanks off the highway to Anchorage. They took the combined choirs and bands from the Denali Borough School District and Nenana City School to the Aurora Music Festival in Cordova, Alaska. In this case, however, as noted in the article by Candace Mudge, the musicians practiced separately to prepare for the festival.

“Other directors cannot fathom how our kids ‘do this combining thing’ with little to no combined practices …,” she writes. “Our kids do not know any different [or] how amazing this is because it is just something we have been doing for the last 15 years … We just prepare each school individually to know the material well enough to then ‘sit in’ with other musicians. … It is a life skill for all of them to be in a position in the present or future, to have the confidence for spontaneous play with other musicians that they haven’t played with before — and succeed.”

David Brown is immediate past president of the New York State School Music Association and superintendent of schools for the DeRuyter Central School District in DeRuyter, New York. There are 338 PreK–12 students in the district. He describes it as a small, impoverished school district spread out over 125 square miles. “People told me about challenges here. I disagreed, and within three years we had the first all-state singer in the history of the district, and the following year we had three all-state students,” he says. “We should never put limitations on students because they are not in a large district. With perseverance, there is nothing you and your students cannot do.”

We are all products of — and to some degree always yearning for — that small-school feel and sense of community.
Brown shares another great example of the power of community in small-school settings. “When I was in my first year, there was a snowstorm that stranded me in town. I could not get home for Thanksgiving with my family so the offers rolled in asking me to dinner. From that experience, I made a lifelong family friend. Small towns care!”

Myron Massey echoes this point. “It was hard at the beginning to have students buy in because the program didn’t have success in their eyes. However, that began to change as the students took on a growth versus a fixed mindset of accepting what is.”

A critical strategy for supporting small schools is nurturing future music educators. James Reddan recently served as chair and associate professor of music and director of choral activities and music education at Western Oregon University in Monmouth, Oregon, which has an enrollment of about 3,300 (he is starting at Central Washington University in September 2023). Reddan says, “One of our successful strategies was to change our curriculum to better serve our undergraduate students, especially given the number of smaller schools in Oregon. We made it a point to support smaller schools by providing onsite clinics, sending preservice music educators to observe and student teach in these classrooms, and inviting teachers to campus for clinics, festivals, observations, and collaborations. Many of our students went on to teach in small schools throughout the state, serving communities where access to music education is greatly needed, often yielding outstanding results as evidenced by their performances at district, league, and state level assessments.”

On the Rivers and in the Clouds

In his thought-provoking book Future Stories, David Christian shares two powerful metaphors for thinking about the future and also connecting the past, present, and future. The first metaphor is from the vantage point of being on a raft, floating down a river, experiencing the constant flow of change in the present moment. With this in mind, picture yourself stepping into the shoes of one of the small-school teachers highlighted in this article. Note their unique challenges, but also the joy and sense of fulfillment of doing very important work in the world, being just where they are meant to be.

A second way to think about the future is to view that same raft going downstream from thousands of feet in the air. From this vantage, you can see not just the present, but also the past and the future. From the clouds, it is easier to see changing patterns across time and space, challenges and successes from the past, and also obstacles and opportunities that lie ahead. This perspective reinforces how deeply connected we all are (in urban, rural, and suburban areas) by ecosystems, weather patterns, countless transportation and supply networks, the food we eat, and the stars we see at night. We are connected by watersheds, rivers, streams, mountains, valleys, plains, and those who have inhabited them and built families, communities, and cultures, and created stories and music from time immemorial. In terms of music education, what “future stories” do we want to come true in all our communities and schools, large and small?

It is common in organizations to create smaller work units when groups get to be too large, or schools within schools at institutions that have large student populations. We do what we need to do as human beings to feel more grounded, less overwhelmed. Certainly, for many students in large schools, the music program becomes their home at school. Perhaps, in a way, we are all products of — and to some degree always yearning for — that small-school feel and sense of community so movingly expressed by the teachers in this article.

Editor’s note: A follow-up article in the October 2023 issue of Teaching Music will focus on advice that experienced small-school teachers have for new teachers.

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