

TEACHER TO TEACHER:

Tips for Getting the
School Year Off to
a Great Start



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



Wanda Vásquez García

General Music Teacher, Escuela Binlingue Pioneer, Lafayette, Colorado

Co-Coordinator, Choral Database for the Institute for Composer Diversity

At the start of the school year, with the renewed energy and the promise of a fresh start, we can easily feel the need to jump right into teaching music. Instead, collaborate with students to create a classroom culture and a learning community that is safe, just, joyful, and fosters belongingness. Devote the time to building relationships and acknowledging and embracing their humanity through activities such as playing getting-to-know-you musical games and community-building circles. Create classroom norms using collaborative practices, set protocols for decision making, and build a classroom playlist using Google forms. When these structures are in place, the stage is set for making meaningful music.

Templates are a time saver. I use Google Slides for all my lessons and, as a result, I have seen more engagement from my students. Slides and Sheets have replaced my need for a planning book. I create a template for each grade level for my lessons in

Slides and include routines, welcome song, affirmations, norms, learning objectives, agenda, reward system, brain break, mindfulness moment, and closing activity. When I sit to plan a new lesson or unit, I simply make a copy of the template and add the content to address the new musical skills.

I also reference a spreadsheet with the standards, learning objectives addressing each standard, social emotional competencies, important dates and cultural celebrations, tentative timeline for when to address each standard during the school year, and possible time for performances. As someone who doesn't follow a particular curriculum, having all this information in one place has been essential to making my planning sessions efficient.

Last summer I created labels for everything in my classroom. Labeling everything with pictures and text has helped me tremendously when students are tasked with finding instruments and supplies. Additionally, substitute teachers have expressed gratitude for the organization in my classroom. I have two binders for students' information: one with rosters with pictures and testing charts and another housing the required accommodations from individual educational and health plans. Even though I am trying to be more mindful of the amount of paper that I use during the year, these are two things I print out.



Jennifer Wells

Curriculum Specialist for Cultural Arts, World Languages, and Physical Education

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Establishing procedures is critical. Think about what you want to achieve in your classroom rather than what you do not want. What will it take to get there? For example, saying that the class will maintain a safe and respectful environment is a positive way of addressing disrespectful behavior. Teachers can also create shared norms. You will share these expectations as a group and post them in the classroom as a daily reminder. You could even have students sign them as a show of shared ownership.

We have the best intentions regarding planning, but once the school year starts, we are surprised by everything we did not see coming (COVID, anyone?). Before the year begins, sit down with the district calendar and make a note of all the scheduled events such as teacher work days, half days, and spring break. Ask administrators for any dates for assemblies or testing. Then plan performances, contests, and fundraisers, and get them approved. Next, note when to schedule buses and substitutes, pass out permission slips, and have after-school rehearsals.

I put together a "bus box" for the year, containing a first aid kit, sewing kit, paper towels, pencils, sticky notes, masking tape, a Tide pen, and other supplies. The box went with

us any time we left the school. The more you plan at the beginning, the more prepared you will be when unexpected moments happen. Planning an extra rehearsal or an extra hour to get to the destination can also help minimize the stress of these events.

When selecting music for the upcoming school year, remember to ask yourself a crucial question: Is it achievable? Will students feel successful when they finish? When I was a first-year teacher, my colleague Terry Hicks offered this advice: Do what your choir can do well. If your students can do unison and perform it musically, do unison. If they can sing in three parts but not achieve the musical elements in the piece, then we have done them a disservice.

Pick pieces that are challenging enough that students will grow musically but not to the point where they do not feel good about their performance. My college professor Maribeth Yoder-White advised, "Students can do anything as long as you don't tell them it's too hard." These ideas have helped frame how I select music for my ensembles.



Nathan Rødahl

Orchestra Director, Port Angeles High School, Washington

Conductor, Bainbridge Island Youth Orchestra and Ensign Symphony

The foundations for a meaningful school year can be summarized as: learn who your students are, play on the first day, and start a consistent routine on the first day.

Learning who your students are starts with their names. Make the effort to learn a student's name and how to *pronounce it correctly* to build a meaningful relationship with a student. Learning who your students are means learning the context from which they come to you. I recommend collecting as much information as you can about your students before the school year begins. Utilize a Google Form or conduct informal interviews, either the prior school year or before the school year begins.

Questions such as: "Where do you practice when you're at home?" and "Will you need an instrument from the school?" are critical to your preparations for the school year. The most useful question to ask students before the school year is: "Is there anything you would like me to know about you?" This allows students to give you context that is critical to understanding them and earning their trust.

Playing on the first day is important because students signed up for your class to make music and because the first day of school is often draining for students sitting through a litany of syllabi and rules with no practical

applications. I recommend that you front-load the work to ensure that each student has a functioning instrument and materials the first day. This is much easier than trying to build and maintain routines later.

The establishment and maintenance of those routines are what set your students up for success under your or anyone else's direction. Consider how much or little is achieved when a non-music substitute is in the room and how many times you have needed a sick day but did not take it because you believed nothing could possibly get done without you there. If the students have a well-established warm-up routine and rehearsal procedures that are the same every day, they will be more trustworthy to begin class and make music with or without your direct instruction.

On the first day of school in my high school orchestra classes, students receive written instructions on our tuning procedure as well as notation for scales/arpeggios that we will play every day that school year. Reinforcing basic technique, posture, and consistency takes daily persistence at any level, and the measure of success for any music program is how much time the students spend making music.



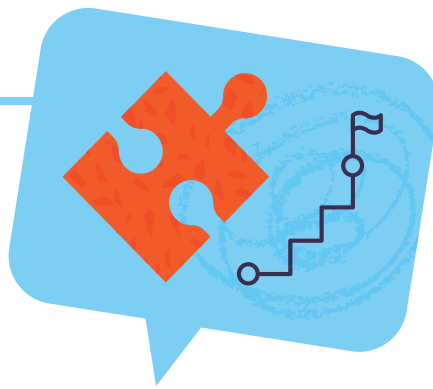
Kimberly Upshaw

Elementary Music Teacher

President, Virginia Elementary Music Educators Association

Decide which topics you wish to cover in each grade level, and use a calendar to map out how to fit it all in. For example, if 4th graders are going





to do a recorder unit, a ukulele unit, a keyboard unit, and perform a musical on top of all the other activities to be taught, you must be organized. I put my performances on the calendar first so I can work backwards from that date to be prepared in time.

I usually plan recorders near the beginning of the school year so that parents can order their child's recorder when buying supplies. Keyboards with headphones work well during state testing time. Bucket drumming is good when the weather is warm enough to go outside to drum. Make sure that you have ordered any new musicals, sheet music, or instruments you need for the year as soon as your school will allow so that you have everything you need in time.

You will need a good plan for classroom management. Have your classes help you come up with what the rules should look like in your classroom and display them. Whenever you introduce an activity, have a student model the correct way to do each step. Students then earn points for demonstrating being respectful, responsible, and ready during class. Those points can either earn the class a reward they are working toward or be part of a competition between classes, grade levels, or teams made up of students

from different grade levels. You can easily keep track of the points in a spreadsheet.

Concentrate on constantly pointing out all the positive things you see instead of the negative. Create an inviting cool-down area with some fidgets, stress toys, and breathing exercise ideas for students who need to take a little break to calm down.

Plan on a good balance of work and home life. I try to have a couple of hours after school every day to be with my family or to have some "me" time. I also try hard to get work done during the school week, so that I can enjoy my weekends.

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Andrew Ramsingh

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On the first day of school ask the students to tell you one thing they did over the summer that involved music. Examples include playing an instrument, attending a live music event, watching a TV show or movie, and going to an amusement park or store with music playing over the speakers. Make sure you hear from everyone who wants to share, even if it takes an entire period and you only see them once a week. Look at the student and do not be busy decorating your room or doing other work.

Sit in a student's chair or on the floor to get down to their level. Be sure to have a system in place where only one student is speaking and everyone else is listening. You can pass around an unplugged real microphone, a toy microphone, or even a stick. Students who do not want to share verbally can write about it or draw a picture. Do not make anyone do this if they do not want to, but let them know you are ready to listen whenever or however they want to share.

With this simple activity, you are establishing classroom expectations, showing interest in your students, building rapport/respect, and letting the students get excited and share something personal.

If you are in a new school or have new students, you need to learn all of their names. A good way to learn hundreds of names is using a classroom device to record a video of every student saying, "Hi, my name

is ____." Press record and walk around the room getting a close-up of each student's face as they say their name. Be sure everyone else is quiet, and you are close enough so you can hear the quiet students. Do a practice run to see if anyone is talking while someone else is saying their name.

You can create competition by saying your other classes did it in one take without any noise while someone says their name. Explain that you want to say their names correctly and emphasize how important their names are. This gets the students used to listening to one voice at a time and showing respect for someone's name. You now have a face to the name on a video that you can watch before school or right before the class. Students love watching the video as well because it helps them learn each other's names. You will earn the students' respect sooner if you know their names.



Kathleen Jacoby

Band Director and AP Theory Teacher, Herndon High School, Fairfax County

Executive Board Member, Virginia Band and Orchestra Directors Association

Be ready to hit the ground running the moment students arrive. All administrative and logistical work should be completed before rehearsals begin. I use student leadership members to help set up the room, organize supplies, and make copies ahead of time. On the first day of practice, we are there to rehearse — not to set up.

During the summer, I carve out at least one no-work week for myself.



During most of the summer break, I take care of house-cleaning tasks for an hour or two per day — confirming drill numbers, submitting orders, communicating with boosters. (I generally do this while my own children have an activity so that I can give them my undivided attention later.) However, there's always one week where I go completely offline with no access to work emails or messages. It's the only way my brain can rest and refresh to start the new year strong.

Keep a separate folder for first-day-of-school materials. Generally, I organize my teaching materials by class or unit. But there's one folder I call "School Start" that houses my first day materials: course descriptions, calendars, pre-tests, handouts, information cards, instrument rental contracts, and so forth. While most of these documents are now shared with the students electronically instead of printed, they still allow me to see what materials I need to prepare and update to have everything I need for a great first day of class.



Jammie Phillips

Director of Bands, McKee Middle School

Montgomery, Alabama

For beginning-of-the year planning I focus on the beginners, namely my 6th grade band. I start the school year recruiting the 6th graders at

Open House and visiting their homeroom classes to get them signed up. Once they start coming to my class, we do a little bit of general music where we learn about all the different instruments and instrument families. I show a YouTube video with the Army Field Band that provides instrument demonstrations. (<https://youtu.be/CCTeSjpDsIs>)

Because representation matters, I show videos of different marching, concert, and jazz bands from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) so my students can see musicians that look like them playing instruments well. The HBCU bands I recommend showing are Florida A&M University, my alma-mater Bethune-Cookman University, Southern University, Jackson State University, and Tennessee State University. After about a week, I'll do mouthpiece testing, and I allow them to choose a first and a second choice of what they want to play. Students who choose percussion do an additional rhythm test.

The following week we have rental night where our local music store comes out and rents the instruments to the students after a brief presentation. I prefer beginners to rent instruments because the rental company will repair the instruments free of charge, and 6th graders tend to be rough on instruments.

I also have a mentoring program where I pair 7th and 8th graders with a 6th grader in their section. I have done Saturday fast-start clinics where the students go into sectionals. Some years I have brought in different adult clinicians, and some years I've allowed the 8th graders to teach. This peer interaction helps to create the family support system we want in the band room, as well as builds leadership in the older students. ■

Compiled by Laura Reed, NAfME publications and professional learning manager.

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