

STAYING AFLOAT IN NEW WATERS

BY ANTHONY PURSELL

Many recent college graduates across our state are having the same experience. They successfully navigated their college careers, they completed pre-service teaching assignments, and now they must transition from the role of student to teacher. No matter how seasoned we are in this profession, we can all likely recall the overwhelming feeling we had after accepting our first job as a music educator.

First-year directors are often just trying to keep their heads above water as they learn a new system. Unwritten expectations of the program and of the director can blind side any new hire. And while each situation on its own might be manageable, when they quickly accumulate, you may start to become weighed down—*keeping above water becomes a struggle*. If you are new to the teaching profession or are starting at a new school, keep in mind the following suggestions to help you stay afloat as you begin this new job.

A TIME TO TALK

One of the first ways to learn about the program you just inherited is to talk to people in the know. Since there will be many, limit your interaction to a few groups prior to the beginning of the year so you can synthesize the results more effectively. The following groups can be sources of valuable information.

Students: Meeting with representative members of the student body is critical as it sends the message that you have their best interests in mind. To be most productive, limit this meeting to seniors and section leaders as they typically have greater investment in the program than others. If there are enough non-

seniors serving as section leaders, meet with the seniors first. This can make the initial meeting more manageable and gives the seniors a feeling of being your top priority. Although we must clearly establish that we are in charge, we also should not discredit the value some students offer as we will learn much from their perspective.

If you are replacing a popular director, the seniors in your program can be your greatest allies (once they trust you). It is especially important to listen to their concerns given that they often fear everything is about to change as they begin their final year under a new director. When I took my last high school position in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I met with the seniors and took notes on what was most important to them. From everyday traditions to game-day procedures, there was much I learned. While you might be inclined to change some traditions to fit your program philosophy, I urge you to approach change at a subtle pace to maintain a nucleus of support.

Parents: Meeting with this group often offers an adult version of the information you receive from the students. When meeting with parents, start with a small representative group prior to meeting with them all. Most established programs have a booster organization. In this case, meet with the officers to learn how this organization functioned in the past. Then you can slowly begin to shape the parent involvement to fit your vision. Once you have met with the small group, have a meeting with all parents to reach out to them and demonstrate your extended interest in their children. Logistically, this is also a great opportunity for you to secure parent permissions for the year, have them complete important forms, and sign them up to volunteer.

Feeder Program Personnel: A new director often has the disadvantage of not knowing which students are moving from one school to another. One suggestion is to talk to the director of the students' feeder schools. Obtaining a copy of their most recent concert program, especially if personnel are listed can be very useful. Having this list of students is especially important as some who aren't registered this year may have gotten lost in the shuffle and are simply awaiting your guidance. A recent concert program can also offer insight into the type of music incoming students are accustomed to and may provide information about their skill levels. Caution should be exercised, however, as anyone can program "Lincolnshire Posy."

Former Director: While it is true that you are free to speak to whomever you want, there may be times when it could create an uncomfortable situation for your administrators if they believed you and the previous director were collaborating. To prevent this, simply ask your immediate supervisor if they would encourage you to contact the former director to ask questions. You can learn so much from your predecessor, but like everyone else

on this in-the-know short list, you should take their advice with the understanding that it too may need to be filtered.

Coaches: Meeting with the coaches can help build a bridge of support from your office to the athletic department. This relationship can be useful and provide a healthy pillar of support. When I met with the head football coach, I told him I wanted to know what I could do to enhance his players' game-day experience. His only request was for a pregame tunnel for the players to run through while we played the fight song. Knowing how simple this was to execute, I offered my support and we had a tunnel for him and his players. With this simple offering, making a friend in an influential position within the community and the administration was secured. While focusing on the athletic department may seem incongruous with our purpose, this relationship may prove more beneficial than you would expect, especially in these times of uncertainty for music education.

A TIME TO WORK ALONE

It is exciting when you finally get your keys and are left to explore. Sometimes,

however, that excitement is short-lived. When I inherited my first position, the band hall was left in shambles. The library consisted of several stacks of music, each about three feet high, arranged along the perimeter of the band hall. The music stands were covered in graffiti, and many were in poor working order. Records from the previous years were not to be found. It was truly a heart-wrenching moment. My first goal was to make this room into a home for our students and change the existing appearance that no one seemed to care. *The excitement would return.*

Classroom Inventory: My principal's first request was to do something about the music stands. Like many other directors have, I took it upon myself to paint every music stand. In addition to the stands needing overhauling, the entire band hall carpet needed an extreme makeover. After much work, and a few creative solutions, which I'll be happy to share in an unpublished format, the new carpet was in and our makeover was complete. While making physical improvements to a music room requires a lot of work and isn't likely something you learned during your college career, it will demonstrate a

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great personal commitment to your students and the community.

Instrument Inventory: During the summer months there may be some instruments that simply cannot be accounted for as students may have them checked out. Regardless, it is a great idea to inspect the condition of each instrument you can verify. Just because there are five sousaphones on the inventory doesn't mean all five are in working condition. If you update your inventory early, you can avoid headaches later when students return and all of your repaired instruments are back in your possession. Remember, most instrument repair technicians are very busy during the summer.

Music Inventory: Consider selecting your music as soon as possible. If you are using music from your existing library, find that piece and inspect it. Ask yourself at least the following questions as you review the music. Are all of the parts and score included? If it is an older arrangement, what key are the piccolo and horns in? Is the arrangement too difficult?

Program Evaluation: The investigative work once required to find out how your band looked and sounded is greatly reduced in today's digital world. If there are no audio or video recordings in your possession, explore YouTube, Facebook, Myspace, and other multimedia sites. While videos and recordings are ideal, simply looking at still pictures may give you some insight into what to expect with your program.

Recruiting Calls: It is important that new directors attempt to contact every student in the program. While this does take a considerable amount of time, the payoff can be tremendous. You may find that some students on last year's personnel list are not on your current list, and a call from you may help influence productive students to return.

Administrative Tasks: One of the most beneficial tasks you can do is to create a handbook. A simple search on the Internet can yield dozens of handbook examples. (You can find examples in the Music Educator Toolkit located in the Teaching Resources section of the TMEA website). Putting together a handbook about a program you have yet to lead is not easy; however, by covering the major points, you will have a foundation to build on when you revise it for the following academic year. A few beneficial items for

any handbook are: (1) a letter to students and parents briefly explaining who you are and the direction of the program; (2) a letter from the principal and/or other administrators to show the bond between you and the administration is strong; and (3) a signature page that must be returned that includes a statement such as, "I have read and understand the rules and regulations of the XYZ Music Handbook." Having both the student and parent signatures will increase accountability.

As a first-year music educator, there will be many times you might feel like

you're struggling just to tread water. In those moments, it's important to remember there is a network of experienced swimmers in our state ready and willing to help you stay afloat. The suggestions offered here are just a few examples of the countless ideas music educator colleagues in your district and beyond are waiting to share with you to help you succeed in these new waters. ■

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