Reports from across the country continue to reveal that nearly half of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. While these years can be the most difficult in a music educator’s career—full of issues your music education degree couldn’t fully prepare you for—they also do not have to be impossible to survive. If you’re a less-experienced teacher, consider the following tips from teachers who were in your shoes not that long ago—teachers who happily belong to that other 50% continuing to work in this most rewarding profession, accomplishing what really matters: making a positive impact on a child’s life.

**FIND A MENTOR**

Working with a supportive mentor can help relieve some of the stress you will experience in your first five years. A mentor should be someone with whom you feel comfortable sharing your struggles and weaknesses. When seeking a mentor, do some research by listening to recordings of their groups, watching them teach a class, and asking them questions before they observe you in your work. Evaluate whether you share a similar philosophy on music and teaching.

There are many ways to find a mentor: you might feel comfortable with someone from your college experience, a student-teaching mentor, another teacher in your district, or a retired teacher in the area. As an active TMEA member, you can also sign up to be paired with a mentor from the TMEA Mentoring Network (go to www.tmea.org/mentor).

Plan a good time for your mentor to visit your school, and try to have them observe several times throughout the year. Make time outside of class to obtain their feedback—not just about how your group sounds, but also on your teaching style and how your students respond to you. Don’t be afraid to ask your mentor questions, no matter how trivial they may seem.

**STRIKE A BALANCE**

Many new teachers find it challenging to manage their never-ending task list. In our work, the list never really goes away, so we must do our best to chip away at it day-by-day. Prioritize your list into what must be done today and what can wait until tomorrow. Look ahead to upcoming events and evaluate what can be accomplished ahead of time so that you aren’t scrambling as you near the event. There will be days that require you to stay late to get work done. Given that, do what you can to work efficiently during your conference period and after school to minimize this
BUILD RAPPORT

As in any good relationship, the key to developing a positive rapport with administrators is communication. Consistently inform them of your accomplishments—administrators won’t know about the wonderful things happening in your classes unless you tell them. Include administrators on group emails, invite them to watch a rehearsal or run-through, and periodically submit news for the daily announcements. At every public performance, recognize your administrators and their support for your program. Try to handle any conflict or discipline issues internally; however, if you foresee a problem with a parent or student escalating, inform an administrator before the matter reaches their desk.

Like administrators, parents need open lines of communication. They should be informed of calendar items, grading procedures, and participation expectations from the beginning of the school year. Utilize multiple methods for keeping parents updated—paper handouts, administrative software (we use Charms), the program’s website, Facebook groups, and Twitter accounts. Regardless of how you communicate, be sure to understand and follow your district and campus rules about communicating electronically with parents and students.

As you consider the best way to communicate, read “Going Social” and “What You Should Know Before You Post” in the August issue of Southwestern Musician (available at www.tmea.org/emagazine).

MIRROR SUCCESS

While it’s true throughout your career, in your initial years it is especially important to look for successful programs to emulate. Listen to recordings of professional groups and outstanding examples of student groups in your division. On a day off, observe directors in a neighboring school district, and take the opportunity to attend Region and All-State rehearsals to learn from highly-respected directors. As you focus on improving your skills as a teacher, always remember to nurture your foundation as a musician. Attend professional concerts, practice your instrument, and continue to improve your craft.

PROGRAM WISELY

When it’s performance time, there is no room for excuses. You can’t turn around at a contest and offer the judges a disclaimer. Simply do the best you can with what you have, and you can come away from each performance with a sense of accomplishment. Programming is one of the most important aspects of our work that many teachers find challenging early in their careers. Before reviewing literature, you must fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of your group as this will certainly influence your decisions as well as advice you seek from others. Take time to review the UIL Prescribed Music List (PML) available at www.uiltexas.org/music/pml. Obtain scores and listen to recordings to build your knowledge of the repertoire from which you are choosing, and ask for advice from veteran teachers.

Once you have chosen a piece, make a long-range rehearsal plan. Know where you want your group to be by the precontest performance as well as where they need to be by the actual contest date. Devise more specific rehearsal plans along the way, and know that you may have to adjust your plans based on what you hear in rehearsals. (For more guidance on rehearsal strategies, read “Breaking the Everyday Routine” on page 12.)

ESTABLISH STRUCTURE

Being organized will help you stay calm throughout the chaos that our job often presents, and demonstrating structure behind how you work will help parents and colleagues recognize you as a dependable leader. While it sounds basic, it is important to keep your classroom and office area clean; students respond better in a tidy environment and will begin to take pride in their surroundings.

Establish daily procedures from day one. Set expectations for each aspect of your program: from rehearsal methods...
to road trip behavior standards. Be clear and consistent with your procedures, and know that it might take more time and repetition at the beginning of the year to get them established.

**REMAIN PATIENT**

Change will not come quickly to any music program, especially one that has been established for many years. Know that each year really will get easier; you will have more experience, and your students and their parents will respect you more each year you are at the school. Be consistent with your expectations, energetic and supportive of your students, and change will come.

**GET INVOLVED**

In addition to connecting with colleagues in your district and on your campus, it is imperative to get involved in your profession. In addition to TMEA, consider membership in other associations as well (TODA, TCDA, TBA, ATSSB, etc.). Regularly attend your professional associations’ meetings and conferences. As a member of these associations, there will always be volunteer opportunities that allow you to become more involved and connected with colleagues from across the state. Don’t pass up this chance to get to know other successful directors. You will be giving back to the profession, but in the process you will gain much more.

As you consider these ideas for a successful start, know that they are all the result of many successes and failures we have shared as a close circle of friends. When we compiled these ideas, we realized one important thing each of us share—we survived our first five years by focusing on teaching what were passionate about: music.

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