

Work Life



How's Your Balance?

by Karen Cross

Some marathoners will tell you that the final 10K of a race is the most difficult. Even though they have 20 miles behind them and *only* 6.2 to go, they're in pain. And despite that pain, they need to step up their pace. At this point, some marathoners *hit the wall*. They struggle to find the energy and will to finish what they've trained for so long to do.

Well into another school year's final stretch, it might feel like you're in the last 10K of your own marathon—hastening your pace to complete additional performances, competitions, standardized testing, group trips, recruiting efforts, and end-of-year tasks that have no musical relevance. Are you in a confident sprint to the finish? Or are you stumbling in a confused haze, searching for the motivation to make it across?

This is the time of year when many music teachers complain about being burned out, and some even begin to look for other work. As a professional organization of Texas music educators, we wanted to better understand how our members perceive their work load and its effects. We especially wanted to learn from those who have managed to achieve a healthy balance in their lives so we could share their valuable strategies. To that end, TMEA recently surveyed its active teacher members about workload, stress levels, and wellness. The information offered here is based on 3,378 responses (26% of our active membership). While we didn't approach this as a scientific study, we do believe the results are significant and revealing, and we hope you find them helpful.

Who Participated?

The divisional affiliation of the survey participants aligns with the divisional representation of our 12,700+ active members. The grade levels taught also mirrors the profile of our total membership.

Participants' teaching experience is also varied:

- 121 are in their first year (4%)
- 604 have taught 1–5 years (18%)
- 672 have taught 6–10 years (20%)
- 956 have taught 11–20 years (28%)
- 1,025 have completed over 21 years of teaching (30%)

Thanks go to all who participated. You helped establish a meaningful reflection of our membership through this survey.

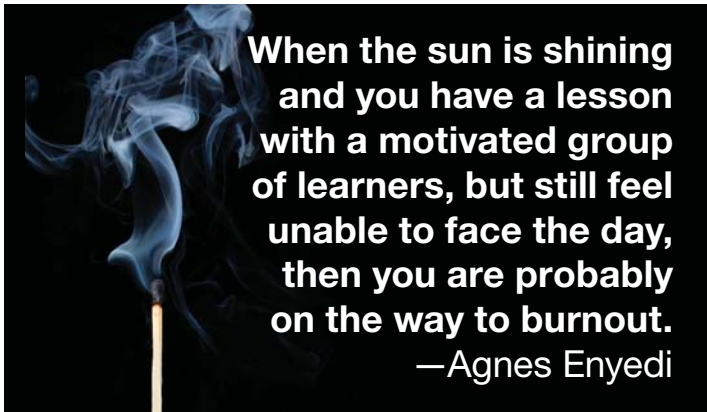
What We Learned

We asked questions about workload (hours worked, students taught), job-related stress, burnout, support systems, non-work activities, fitness, food choices, and more. We asked open-ended questions to gain advice from members in areas that could help teachers achieve better work-life balance. Given our space limitations, we can't print everything we learned, so for even more feedback from this survey, go to www.tmea.org/balanceresults.

Hours Worked and Students Taught

Survey results revealed that for most teachers, a 60-hour work week is often the norm. Over 70% reported spending more than 31 hours directly interacting with students each week. Within that group, more than 55% spend another 11–30 hours at school with other work. They also work up to 10 hours during the week at home. And on the weekends, most spend up to 10 more hours working from home.

We found that 59% of teachers usually arrive up to one hour before school starts, 38% arrive up to two hours early, and 3% are there two hours or more before the start time. In this final group, over 45% also stay more than two hours after school.



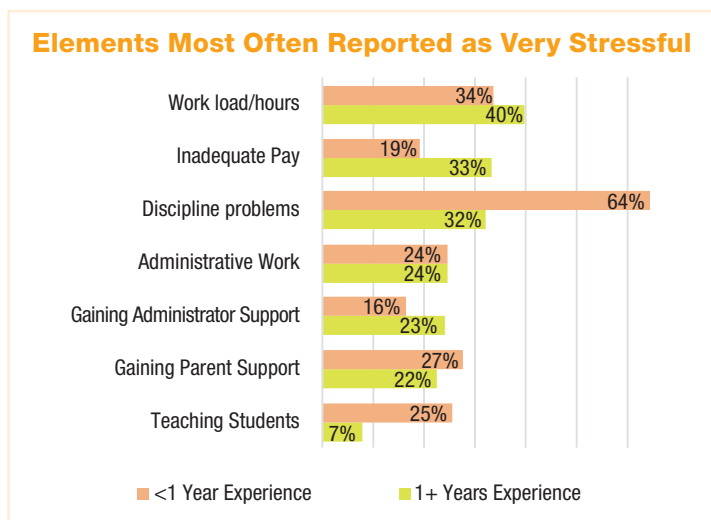
**When the sun is shining
and you have a lesson
with a motivated group
of learners, but still feel
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then you are probably
on the way to burnout.**
—Agnes Enyedi

Over 45% of our teachers reported being the only one responsible for the music instruction of their students, and the following results tell us that the majority of our teachers are instructing between 100 and 500 students:

- 0–50 students: 3%
- 51–100 students: 11%
- 101–200 students: 39%
- 201–500 students: 34%
- 501+ students: 13%

Job Stress

Everyone experiences stress for many reasons every day. Hearing a certain ringtone can immediately trigger negative thoughts; catching a glimpse of your unread email count can make you feel overwhelmed. While grounded by the desire to share your joy of music with your students, you are also responsible for *so much* that has *so little* to do with music. As our survey reflects, these other responsibilities are often what raise teacher stress levels. It’s interesting to note that first-year teachers are the only group with significant numbers who said that teaching students is *very stressful*. The following chart includes those elements of work that over 20% of members identified as *very stressful* and shows the difference between responses by first-year teachers and teachers with one or more years of experience:



Over 58% of teachers report that their job-related stress is high *but* is balanced by other activities/interests. However, 16% report having constantly high and unmanageable stress levels. With job stress at that level, burnout can become a real issue.

Are You Burned Out?

We’ll admit that our stress levels spiked when we reviewed responses to the questions about teacher burnout. While unrealistic, we still didn’t want to learn that burnout was leading any member to consider a career change. However, of the 3,191 members who answered, 1,161 (37%) said they are considering a career change because of burnout. If you replied *yes* to that question, we hope that what you read here will help you know you’re not alone and will equip you with strategies to combat that burnout in the future.

The charts on the following page offer a view by TMEA division and by experience level of members who said they are currently burned out and who say they’re considering a career change because of burnout. When reviewing the charts, be sure to consider the number of member replies shown here as the response rates might be too limited to draw meaningful conclusions:

Division	Years of Experience					
	<1	1–2	3–5	6–10	11–20	21+
Band	50	69	165	276	421	402
Orchestra	15	24	54	75	87	107
Vocal	28	48	101	139	194	207
Elementary	23	34	77	135	179	204
College	0	1	3	10	18	46

We also inspected this information by grade level taught, and within the middle and high school group, by division. That information is shared in charts on the following page as well.

What Others Say About Burnout

In addition to our survey results, we reviewed several other sources on burnout. We focused mostly on teacher burnout, and where possible, music teacher burnout. Christina Maslach, a leading researcher in this topic, offers a notable definition of burnout: “A syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one’s instruction), and reduced personal accomplishment.”

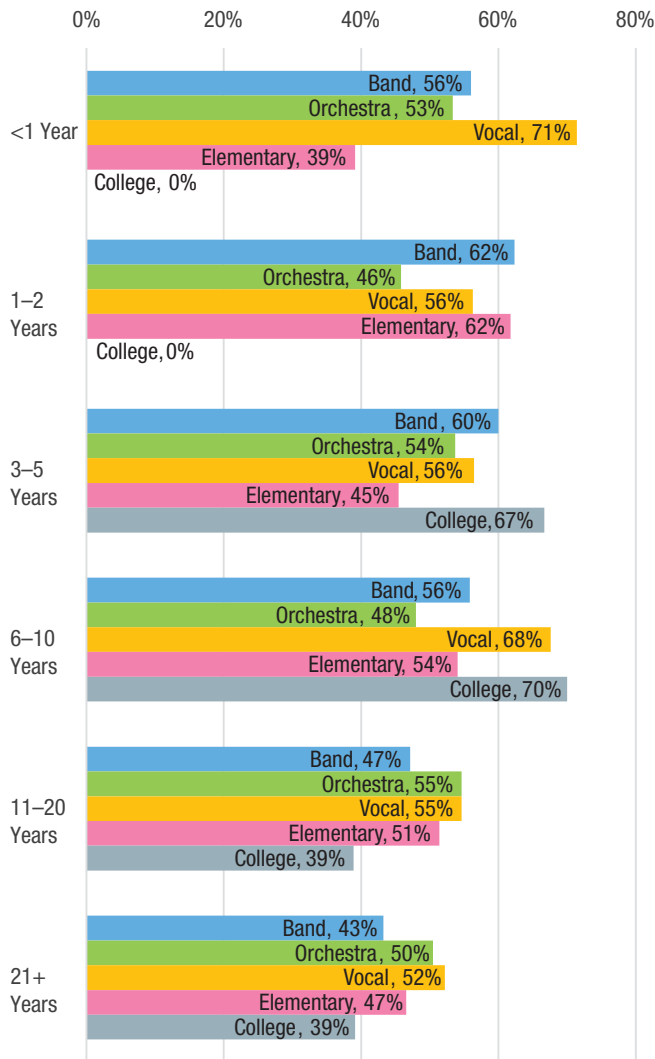
Common advice from these resources conveyed that teachers need to realize that burnout is common, there are ways to cope with it, and it’s not necessarily a sign that you are in the wrong job. These sources also explain that when people say they’re burned out, what they’re experiencing might not be severe enough to be classified in that way. For example, being exhausted by your job isn’t burnout. You simply have a very demanding job, mentally and physically, and it’s going to exhaust you. *It should.*

In May 2015, teacher trainer Agnes Enyedi explained, “All of us feel tired, even exhausted at times, but this is perfectly normal if you have a full schedule. Some of us may also have felt like calling in sick and staying in bed on a rainy Friday morning, just before a lesson with a challenging group. That’s also understandable. But when the sun is shining and you have a lesson with a motivated group of learners, but still feel unable to face the day, then you are probably on the way to burnout.”

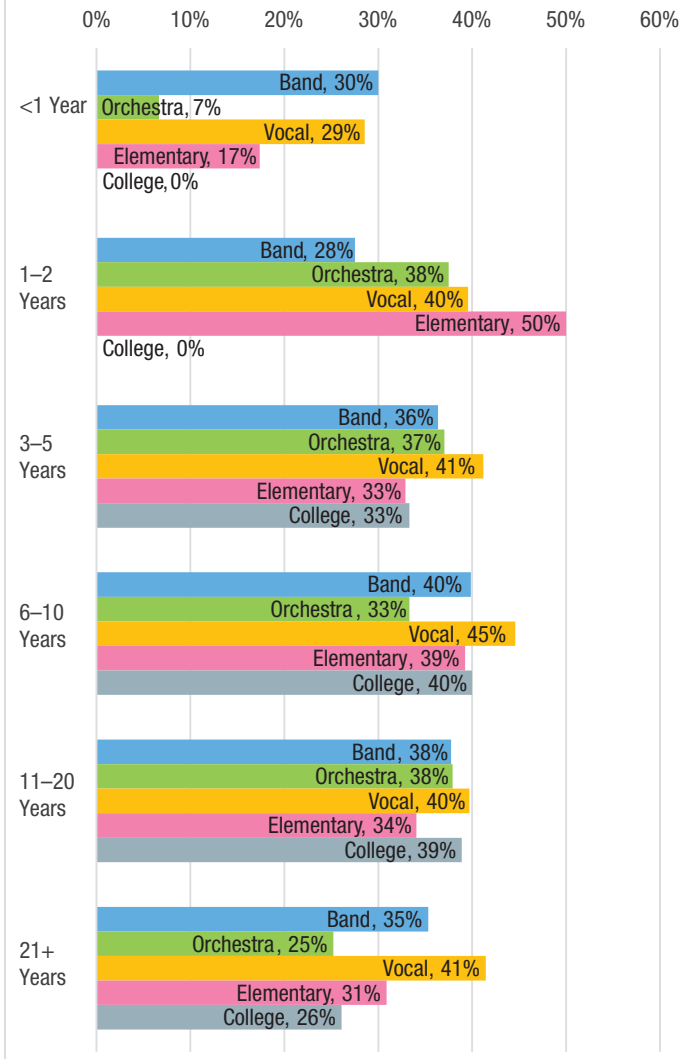
Another researcher and presenter on the topic of music teacher burnout is Barbara McClain, professor of music education for the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. McClain has studied and published articles and an online instructional video on the

Music Teachers Who Report Being Burned Out and Music Teachers Considering a Career Change for That Reason

Currently Burned Out: By Years Taught/Division

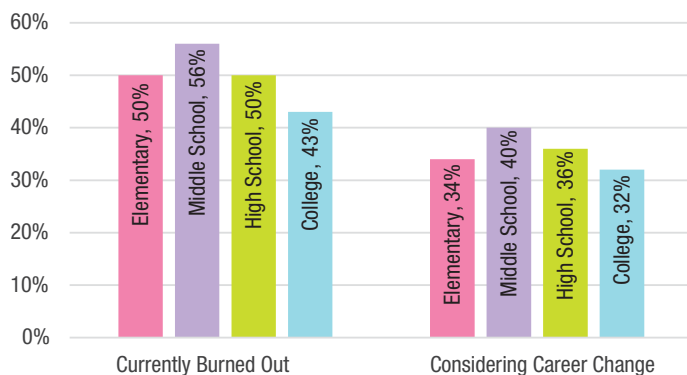


Considering a Career Change: By Years Taught/Division

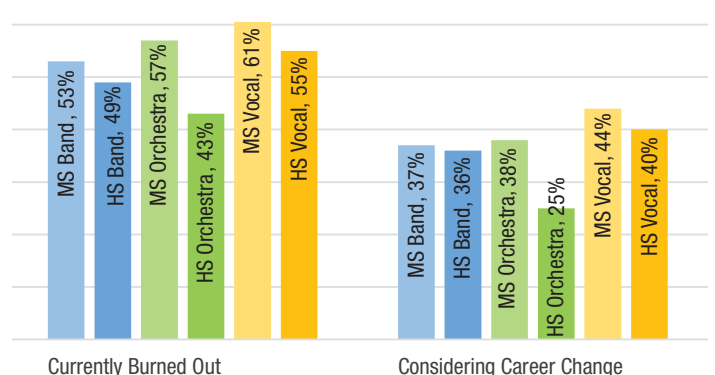


Overall Response: Currently Burned Out: 52% / Considering a Career Change: 37%

By TMEA Division Only



Middle & High School Teachers by Division



topic. We found her resources on this topic particularly informative. To read her publication “Music Teacher Burnout,” go to www.tmea.org/burnout-mcclain and to watch her instructional video on this topic at www.tmea.org/burnoutvideo.

As McClain states, if you’re interested enough to learn more on this topic, you’re probably not severely burned out. If you were, you wouldn’t have the motivation to learn more. With that, we’ll turn the focus to the survey questions that yielded answers by members who have learned how to achieve a balance in this demanding job.

Do What Works for You

Teachers who reported having a healthy balance in their lives also reported much lower incidence of burnout. Their comments emphasize that when trying to achieving balance, one size definitely does not fit all. If you need to improve your work-life balance, you *will* have to make changes. So read the strategies our members offer and do something—*now*. If what you try first isn’t right for you, try something else. There isn’t a miracle cure for burnout, and there also isn’t a single remedy that can help everyone manage it. However, if you will do something to improve your work-life balance, you’re on the right track.

To Unplug or Not to Unplug?

You don’t have to look far to find stories about the influence of technology on our lives—positive and negative. With Internet connectivity on devices in our pockets or even on our wrists, we can be constantly informed and connected. Over 47% of teachers report that they answer emails and voicemails at *any* time of day, whether at work or at home. Depending on your perspective, this level of connectivity might bring you relief or stress.

While 36% of teachers report that their technology use is not an issue, the remaining 64% have designated times in their day as tech-free or they say they want to begin that practice.



Regardless of how you use technology in your personal life, members repeatedly pointed out that it’s critical to limit responding to work-related emails while at home. Their comments didn’t focus just on the technology use but rather on how the convenience can lead to hasty replies you might later regret. Many members establish times during which they handle emails and voicemails (and they communicate that with parents to set an expectation). Some members view emails at home, but they won’t act on them until the workday. The following are just a few of the ways our members handle emails and voicemails to reduce the stress often associated with them.

Member Advice on Handling Emails and Voicemails

- A weekly email bulletin to my students and parents usually keeps them in the loop so that my email is not too stressful.
- For stressful emails, click reply and delete the address in the “To” field so you don’t accidentally send before you’re ready. Type away. Save to drafts. Let it sit for a while. Edit your response. Send (and blind copy an administrator if it is a serious issue).
- Don’t check email before bed!
- I set up email folders by event (Region, UIL, fall concert, etc.) and by group (department, choir, school, etc.), and I create one “To Do” folder. Every time I open an email I must either delete it, respond to it, or put it in a folder.
- I use the Remind app for two-way communication with parents for my afterschool groups. It is much more convenient because I can access it with my phone, iPad, or laptop. I can communicate with individual parents or groups. It allows me to set office hours and other customizations.
- I save the text of emails I will likely send again and flag that text for reuse the next year.
- I tell parents I prefer to be contacted by phone. Texts (and sometimes emails) tend to get confusing. I try to answer each voicemail the day I receive it.
- I check email and voicemail three times daily: morning, conference, and at the end of the day.
- I do not automatically have my work email connected to my phone. I have to log in to check it. I don’t want to see work emails until I’m in work mode.
- I print emails that require more time for a response and post them on a cork board next to my desk so that I don’t forget them.
- Unsubscribe to as much junk as possible and delete unimportant emails ASAP. When sending a possibly controversial email, get a coworker to proof it to ensure a professional tone is being used.

Find Support

Feeling completely isolated is one of the key symptoms of the most extreme burnout. And in the music teaching world, that’s a real concern. Many of our members serve as the sole music teacher on their campus, and music programs are often physically and programmatically segregated from the rest of the school. Our survey showed that more teachers who said they have no one to turn to for support answered that they are burned out and considering a career change (10% higher response rate).

With over 12,000 music teacher members in TMEA, we should be poised to prevent this experience of complete isolation. If you’re not already, get connected by attending music teacher meetings and events (Region meetings, the TMEA convention, Regional workshops). If you’re new to the profession, join the TMEA Mentoring Network so you can establish a connection with a veteran teacher who is ready to listen and offer support during these first years (www.tmea.org/mentor). Veteran teachers who took this survey stressed the importance of having someone to turn to with your questions who can offer you support,

objective criticism, and guidance. Even if you work with other music teachers, it's important to have someone outside your work group who can be supportive and objective.

Sleep

While this might be one of the most critical factors in reducing stress and maintaining balance, it's also one we often sacrifice. We all know we need sleep and that it should be consistent. From our survey, we found that 56% of teachers usually get 6 hours of sleep or less, and 44% get 7 hours or more. If you're in the first group, consider changing something in your routine to help improve your sleep habits.

Get Moving

Of all the elements examined in this survey, the one that appeared to have the most radical influence on a healthy work-life balance is exercise. Overall, 48% of teachers believe they have a healthy balance. When you limit the responses to those who also report exercising daily, that healthy-balance percentage flies to 71%.

While most of our members report exercising at some level, 39% report not exercising at all, but within that group, 80% want to increase their exercise. If you're physically able, this is clearly an area that can help you improve your work-life balance. One common point made by many members is that even when you don't believe you have enough time to exercise, just *do something*. The following are some valuable suggestions from members who are managing to incorporate exercise into their busy schedule.



Member Advice on Getting Exercise

- As an applied music instructor, I exercise in between lessons to clear my head and alleviate the problems of sitting all day. In those 10 minutes I do jumping jacks, pushups, planks, or burpees. It's really helps in relieving stress.
- On days that I get home before 6 P.M., it is the first thing that I do with my husband and son. We all watch a 30-minute workout video together and do the exercises in our living room.
- I leave work in time to make it to the gym at least three times per week, no matter what. I started about a year ago, and I feel so much better now that I'm 20 pounds lighter.
- Going to the gym took too much time for me. On my home

treadmill, I can watch shows, read, or listen to music 30 minutes five times a week.

- Do it before work. Afterward, you are too tired! Go 30–45 minutes, and make it really count. It takes a while to get used to getting up even earlier, but it so worth it!
- Get a friend and make each other accountable!
- I change into my workout clothes before I leave work. This keeps me from backing out on my exercise plans.

I remind myself that my personal health comes first. All other possible successes of life are diminished if my personal health is reduced to back-burner status.

- Protein/energy shakes near the end of the workday help me feel like I have the energy to go to the gym.
- I cycle to and from work. It is a great way to start and end my workday and guarantees me at least a moderate amount of exercise and outdoor time almost daily.
- I started with 6 pushups and kept at it until I got to 50. Then I gradually added sit-ups and squats and some stretching. Now I also do pull-ups and a few barbell exercises, and I plan to add walking and other exercises. This has been gradually growing for about two years. The big thing has been not to get overwhelmed by the pressure of adding too much at once.
- Do short workouts that are realistic. Start small so you do something—a 15-minute walk around the neighborhood is a good start. Get outside!
- Too many of us approach exercise as optional—it's not! You will feel better, have more energy, get sick less, get hurt less, and have a better life in general just by committing 30 minutes five times a week to you.
- I use an app called Seven. It's just 7-minute workouts a day—very manageable for a busy schedule.
- Jog with the cross country team before school. The younger kids are slower. The coaches appreciate having someone out there to act as a sweeper on long runs. The kids love to see you out there with them.
- My partner teacher and I have made a YouTube playlist of Zumba videos that we work out to immediately after school. We bring our clothes and project the video in my classroom.
- I get on the treadmill for a fast-paced walk for the duration of four songs. By not designating a specific time requirement, it feels simpler. Eventually you can add another song or intensity little by little.

Choose the Right Fuel

Like finding time for exercise during the week, eating well also poses a significant challenge for many teachers. Over 47% of teachers responded that they have been trying to eating healthier lunches or they want to but don't feel able. Fortunately, hundreds



If you're burned out, you can't light the fire in your students. Keep your own flame going!

of teachers provided advice on how they've been able to sustain a healthy approach to eating during the school day. As you review some of their ideas, keep in mind that those who reported daily exercise *and* eating well at lunch had a much lower rate of burnout and a much higher rate of a healthy work-life balance.

- Preparation is key. I eat lots of veggies and lean protein that I prepare. Drink lots of water! Dehydration in the afternoon is a major cause of fatigue.
- Cook breakfast ahead (e.g., breakfast casseroles and other things you can freeze for the week).
- Eating a few nuts or raisins or vegetables during the passing periods can help maintain energy.
- Put frozen fruit in a plastic bag, and by the time you have a break to eat it, it's thawed but still cold.
- I always have SlimFast or Special K protein shakes and granola bars on hand for emergency lunch or pick-me-ups if I'm short on time.
- I boil several eggs and keep them at home to grab for a quick breakfast or snack. I keep fresh fruit, cheese, and crackers in my office to snack on. I try to keep things like hummus, guacamole, or soup on hand.
- I buy fully cooked frozen chicken breasts and salads from the store. Every day I bring a chicken breast and a salad. It's quick, easy, and healthy. I could make them myself and save money, but I know I won't!
- I set a 9:30 P.M. alarm on weekdays, and at that time, I pack my lunch for the next day and start getting ready for bed.
- I often use a food diary to keep track of what I'm eating throughout the day. This helps me be accountable for the unhealthy snacks I would otherwise absently be eating.
- I pack three or four small nutritious snacks (protein bars, low-fat cheese sticks, a boiled egg, etc.) and eat one snack during each of my 15-minute breaks because I don't have a proper lunch break. This keeps me going, and keeps body chemistry steady.
- I plastic-wrap individual servings of an egg casserole and put them in the freezer. In the morning, I toss one in my lunch bag and it's thawed by lunchtime—easy protein.
- An apple and a spoonful of peanut butter is simple and a great pick-me-up!
- I use the My Fitness Pal app on my phone to track everything I eat. My concern is calories. Tracking calories has

prompted me to eat healthier foods since they tend to be lower in calories. Better quality food equals more consistent energy.

- Stay hydrated throughout the day. It is hard to do this when you have limited restroom opportunities, but your body will pay the price in the long run if you do not hydrate.

Listening to the Voice of Experience

Survey responses show that to lessen the effects of burnout, it is essential to establish personal and professional habits that positively influence your work-life balance. While not revelatory information, it's worth repeating given that recent studies tell us that 40–50% of teachers leave the profession in the first five years. While we would like to believe that doesn't apply to Texas music teachers, our survey results are that 35% of music teachers who are within their first five years are considering a career change because of burnout.

With that in mind, we asked teachers to offer general advice on how to maintain better balance. With over 1,500 responses, we hope one or more of the following might resonate with you, whether you're a first-year or fifteenth-year teacher.

Member Advice on Achieving Balance

- Ask for help *when* you need it. (It's not a question of *if*—everyone needs help.)
- Be patient with your students. Be patient with yourself.
- I've been doing this for 37 years and I have learned that my students benefit most when I slow down and enjoy each moment with them. Nothing—no contest, no performance—is more important than the people who are involved.
- Keep practicing your instrument/voice and form a chamber music group for fellowship.
- Be consistent and pursue constant professional growth. Attend workshops throughout the year.

Everyone can use a hand

The TMEA Mentoring Network links successful music education professionals with new Texas music educators and offers a proactive program of one-on-one mentoring to each new music teacher.

**If you need a mentor, sign up.
If you can serve as a mentor, sign up.
www.tmea.org/mentor**

- Don't sweat the small stuff—after you figure out what the small stuff is. It may take several years, but you *will* get the hang of it.
- Find a support person to talk with, to be a sounding board, counselor, and confidant. Don't allow yourself to become isolated.
- Don't try to be a superhero your first year. It's okay to suspend a project for the weekend and get it done first thing Monday morning. Perform for the sake of performing, not ratings.
- Don't take extra church jobs or community children's choir jobs until you have at least a year under your belt.
- Don't try to have the best *band*, try to have the best *students*.
- Make a list of the things that must be done today, this week, and this month. That way you know what really needs to get done and you can stop worrying about not getting it all finished!
- Q-TIP: Quit Taking It Personally. Don't stress out over things at work. Kids and coworkers will respond to something negatively every day of your career.

It gets better, but it never stops. If you are going to be great, you will have to learn the discipline to prepare and the discipline to walk away.

- A tired, burned-out teacher is a teacher who will, sooner or later, leave the profession, or worse, stay in the profession in that state. I almost became that teacher. Instead I made the choice to take a break, re-examine my priorities, and begin taking care of myself. I still work hard, but I am a better teacher, friend, husband, and father because I don't let my work week become completely unmanageable.
- In your first year, commit to leaving work at school three days a week and on every other weekend. It will force you to plan ahead and not work constantly. Make to-do lists and good, easy sub plans for emergencies.
- Family, friends, and outside activities keep music teachers balanced, and their importance cannot be underestimated. I am watching friends retire from the profession and go through depression that seems fueled by the fact that their identity was anchored in their ensembles and their work.
- This is a career. Every year is different. My father, who was my band director, told me that I would have one bad year for every three good years. That pattern has held pretty true.
- Let the students help you. In addition to teaching music, we are teaching the students to be independent members of society. Not only will it give them ownership of the program but they will also learn organization skills!
- Be happy in the small things. Don't covet other programs, because not all programs are the same.
- Don't let the people who have no idea how to bring a performance to fruition get you down.

Remember your first love and close your door and teach like no one is watching—don't get overwhelmed with the things you can't control.

- Make a Smiles Folder. Put positive responses from parents, notes from students, notices of awards, funny teaching tales, and general compliments in the folder. On days when you feel you've been steamrolled, get out your Smiles Folder and read through it.
- Most of the stress comes from ourselves. Look at what you do as a director and ask yourself if anyone else is requiring you to do it.
- It's important to remain focused on the fact that we are still learning every day of our life, until we cease to exist.
- Remember you are not your contest ratings. Trophies gather dust and are forgotten, but relationships last.
- Stay away from gossipers and grumblers, and avoid becoming one.
- Talk to successful teachers. Don't just complain to others in your same boat. There is a solution for everything. Instead of just disciplining harder, keep asking different people.
- Spend as much energy on your family as you do on your school kids. If you think you can't do that, ask yourself what situation you are creating that doesn't allow for that separation. Did you choose music that is too hard? Could you be more organized? Could you improve your time management?
- Take one element of your teaching and focus on making that better. Once you have accomplished that goal, find another element of your teaching that may cause you stress or anxiety and work on that.
- Work during your conference times. It is easy to take a break, but if you use that time for work, it will help you manage afterschool demands.
- Your students are not always an extension of you or a reflection of your ability. Know what you have taught and modeled and don't take it personally when they choose otherwise. Relish the process—not just the product.

There's Still More to Learn

Over 86% of survey takers said they want to learn more about teachers who made significant changes in their lives and now have a better work-life balance. Given that, we plan to bring you more stories on this topic in future magazine issues.

To review even more details and comments offered by our teachers from this survey, go to www.tmea.org/balanceresults.

Our thanks go to the music teachers who took time to offer us their valuable information. You are the ones with the answers, and we hope that your replies will help many others as they navigate their future in this profession.

