



ORCHESTRA

What is one activity or strategy that helps keep students engaged through the end of the school year?

- After our spring concert, seventh and eighth graders complete a solo composition project. Over three weeks, they work independently with checkpoints to ensure they follow guidelines. During class, they choose whether to focus on their composition or prepare for their end-of-year audition and playing test. Students enjoy showcasing their notation skills, and I offer extra credit for those who perform their solo for the class. —*Olivia Sears, Watkins MS*
- I teach students about basic chord voicing, the structure of 12-bar blues, and basic improvisation using pentascales. In small groups, students choose a 12-bar blues backing track from YouTube and use the chord structure of their chosen track to create a groove (following specific rules I provide) and a melody. They have multiple class periods to put this together. At the end of the project, everyone gets to perform during “open mic night” at our Blues Club. Each student is required to play one rotation of the groove and the melody, and at least two members must perform an improvisation section. —*Heather Gonzalez, John Jay HS*
- Scheduling our spring concert one week before final exams keeps us focused until the end. Additionally, we teach music theory through the year, and after spring break we shift to music appreciation. On a two-year rotation, I teach everything from Baroque and Before, to Jazz/Blues, to pop music of the '50s and '60s, and beyond. We cover the basics and listen to examples in class. Being on a block schedule, I fit these lessons into the last 20 minutes of class after working on spring concert music. —*Michelle Hanlon, Guyer HS*
- Students thrive when they have content-wise teachers invested in their *personal* and *musical* growth. For example, you can offer students an exam packet or audition music appropriate for their growth, allowing them guided choices for being evaluated, with an opportunity to be in a higher-performing ensemble based on their preparation. Ensure they have the tools (e.g., instructional videos on concepts in the packet) and observe how they use them, considering end-of-year fatigue. It can be a good indicator of their interest and commitment. —*Brandon Berens, Faubion MS*
- I like to schedule a concert as late as logistically possible. The later the concert, the more engagement and effective instruction time I get. When all the other subjects are winding down after the STAAR test, we can be ramping up for a final show. —*Chris DeArmond, Pease MS*
- We hold a concerto competition in which our seniors audition with the potential of performing with our top full orchestra on the spring concert. This keeps them engaged through the end of the school year. Our underclassmen are also energized with the notion that it could be them performing on that stage in the future. —*Brigido Beau Garza, Midland ISD*
- Two activities run concurrently after our spring concert: auditions for next year and chamber music performances. Students remain engaged daily as they work toward one or both goals. Audition music is self-selected, allowing individuals to take ownership of their musical growth and showcase their strengths. Chamber music is a collaborative effort of the groups formed within their class periods, fostering teamwork and musical camaraderie. —*Gary Keller, Byron Nelson HS*
- Friday rehearsals are student-led. The first time it happened, it was unplanned, but students kept requesting it. I've found that students have become far more invested in the rehearsal and more confident in their approach to learning their instrument and music. —*Ed Chapman, Aldrich/Fruzen MS*
- I usually end the school year with a fun concert, such as pop songs through decades, TV theme songs, superhero themes, or film scores, all arranged for string orchestra. This time of year also offers the opportunity to collaborate with another department, such as on performing a piece with dancers or a masterwork concert with our choir department. —*Ricky Pringle McCallum HS*
- Students participate in a *Sightreading Throwdown*, using Sightreading Factory and a tournament bracket for each class. Using a site on their Chromebooks, students vote for the winner of each sightreading matchup. While I ultimately select the winner, voting keeps students engaged when it's not their turn. The champion is awarded a plastic trophy and toy crown. With a double-elimination bracket, this usually takes two full classes. Students are already asking when this year's throwdown will start! —*Michelle Bell, Worthington MS*
- It is a tradition for our first fall performance to be a themed concert. In late spring, students vote on the theme, and sometimes before summer break, I provide some of the music. This seems to get the students excited about thinking ahead to the next year. —*Angela Harvey, Crownover MS*

