



STRIKING A BALANCE

This spring, we surveyed TMEA members about balance and burnout. From that survey many members offered strategies they've been using to combat burnout and to achieve a better work-life balance. (If you haven't read the details, go to www.tmea.org/balanceresults.) We recently followed up with a few of those members to learn more about the changes they made to improve their work-life balance. We hope their stories can help others discover ways to have satisfying and successful careers as Texas music educators!

Our thanks go to this month's contributors:

- Travis Almany, Texas A&M University Bands **(TA)**
- Amber Nowlin, Bonham Academy (Elementary) **(AN)**
- Marla Ringel, TCU graduate student, previously Carroll Senior HS Choir Director **(MR)**
- Sadie Awad, Smith MS Orchestra Director **(SA)**

What was teaching like before you made significant changes?

(TA) I was quickly on the way to burnout and a career change. I obsessed over wanting everything to be perfect, especially with student attitude and behavior. I had difficulty relating to students who did not give it their all, did not want to take lessons, or did not practice. I especially had trouble dealing with disruptive students. I took everything personally and it negatively affected me at and away from work. Over time I realized I needed to be happier or my career would not last.

(AN) I was exhausted and stressed out! I ultimately had to take

a medical leave of absence due to severe stress-induced reflux problems.

(MR) I was tired and worn out and often felt isolated. I had a lot of anxiety about parents' and directors' perceptions of me. I thought if I didn't give every moment to my job, I would be open to criticism. If I gave everything I could, I thought it would be harder for people to criticize me because I was doing my best. I ultimately hit a wall where I knew couldn't go on in that same way.

(SA) I was easily working 12- to 14-hour days and still going home feeling like I should have done more and realizing that tomorrow would be an even longer day. Even after all the time and energy spent helping students be their best, I felt no sense of accomplishment. How could students be as successful as I expected when I myself couldn't do that? Something had to change.

What was your personal life like?

(TA) I made no distinction between my life and my career. Away from work, I thought about work, talked about work, focused on work. A bad interaction with a student or parent would keep me up at nights, make me a miserable person, and in turn make me not want to go back to work. I was very focused on career advancement. Life, family, and enjoyment outside work often took a back seat.

(AN) Even when I wasn't there, I obsessed over work (which sometimes I still do, but not constantly), and this wasn't a "creative flow." It was worry. Meanwhile, my physical health suffered as well.

(MR) I was so tired! My brain never shut down from work-related thoughts, so when I went to work, I was already stressed

and anxious for the day ahead. I dreaded opening my email. I hated seeing the new list of issues. I rarely slept well. I was always thinking about all the things I still needed to do—not because they were important, but because I wanted to guard myself against the opportunity for criticism.

(SA) I had no life apart from work. I would typically get home late at night, make dinner, watch an episode on Netflix, and go to bed. On weekends instead of spending time with friends I graded assignments, created assignments, or researched projects for the students to do.

What significant changes did you make?

(TA) I changed several things: I decided to give it my all while at work and not think about work once I walked out the door. (While not always possible, my wife helped me with this greatly!) I learned to keep things in their proper perspective. There are no “band emergencies.” I remind myself to relax. I am just a band director. I shifted my focus from career advancement and impressing others to helping my students have the best possible musical experience. I found the job I connect to best. The first job wasn’t bad—others may have great success in it. The second job wasn’t good—others may have failed there. You have to find the right age, environment, school/community philosophy, and position that fits you. I also found things I am passionate about aside from music and teaching. My time outside school is now spent with family, a strict workout regime, travel, learning new things in and out of music, and taking up new activities.

(AN) I transferred to a different campus assignment in my district. While this isn’t always an option, for me, a literal change

of scenery and change of grade level helped me get out of a negative rut. I started eating healthier and taking multivitamins on a regular basis. With better nutrition and fewer work hours, I had more time and energy to start hoop dancing for exercise. I also began cooking in large batches and freezing meals for my family. Taking the guesswork out of “what’s for dinner?” is huge. In teaching, I became more efficient in lesson planning. The more steeped I am in my knowledge of music and pedagogy, the less time it takes to make plans that work well. Taking Kodály levels continues to make a huge difference for me with lesson planning.

(MR) My two biggest issues were time management and setting job expectations and boundaries. I began by consolidating reminder notes and random lists to declutter my work space. I now use the Erin Condren teacher planner to organize the administrative parts of my job. This streamlines my daily responsibilities. I prioritize to-do list items and assign a time or day to do each. This helped me mentally structure my workday to be most efficient. I also rewrote my handbook to help manage parent and student expectations. At the start of the year, I inform parents and students that I want to respect family time—theirs and mine. I tell parents I will give their kids 100% of my effort during work hours, and then I need to go home and not be a choir director after that time. I was surprised to see how much respect parents and students paid to this boundary.

(SA) Time management was key for me. I started limiting the hours I spend outside school working on school-related things. With my time at work, I plan everything by most important to least important and plan the time of the day I do each item on my list. If at the end of the day I reach my cutoff for time, I wrap up

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what I am doing and save it for the next day. With this one change, I got more accomplished in less time and had more energy and a sense of accomplishment every time I left my classroom.

What was most challenging in making significant change?

(TA) It is very difficult not to let it get to me when students aren't trying or are disrupting class. I have learned not to take the student discipline and attitude issues personally.

(AN) Consistently great nutrition is still what plagues me the most. This spring when my schedule reached its most demanding point, I was running on junk food, takeout, and caffeine. This slowly chipped away at my energy levels, and I was increasingly stressed out and gaining weight. Fortunately, as soon as school let out I was able to get back into an exercise and nutrition groove while in the throes of a Kodály Level 2 certification course! My energy is back, and I'm remembering why these routines are so important.

(MR) The most challenging was realizing I didn't just need a procedural change, but rather a complete shift in mentality. At first, I felt guilty for not being at my job 13 hours a day. I realized that my identity and self-worth were rooted in my success as a teacher. Some days were great and I felt on top of the world, and then some were bad and I felt awful. It was a slippery slope. I couldn't give that much power to my job, so I had to do a lot of soul-searching in terms of who I wanted to be aside from my job.

(SA) The most challenging thing was setting a time for myself, sticking to it, and being okay with walking away from something that wasn't finished. But if I didn't set a limit for myself I would

have kept going until I physically couldn't anymore.

Many teachers say that to achieve a good balance you have to "leave work at work." What do you think?

(TA) Except in rare circumstances—when something is time-sensitive or after a longer time off—I don't check work email when not at work. I don't study scores, make lesson plans, select music, or any other job task at home. This requires being very organized at work. I do not put off any task that can be done immediately. I study scores and make rehearsal plans well ahead of time, I respond to emails immediately, I make phone calls as soon as I can, and I do administrative tasks ahead of time. This ensures that on most days, I do not have to stay any later than necessary and that when I get home, I do not have to do work tasks.

I have also tried to train myself not to think about work, especially the small, troublesome parts, when I am away from the office. When I return to work, the problems seem far less challenging to resolve. The key is to figure out what works for you. For me, it is not thinking or talking about work away from the office. For others, it is important to talk things out with someone away from work.

(AN) A lot of my best classroom ideas don't always happen at school. In fact, many come to me during our yearly trip to Port Aransas. However, aside from allowing creative lesson ideas to flow to me when they strike, I don't bring much work home with me anymore. Of course, if my back is up against the wall with a deadline, then I might enter grades at home, but I try to avoid that whenever possible, and reserve most of my at-home work to the fun, creative parts of planning.

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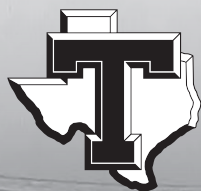
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The Tarleton State University Chamber Choir before their March 27, 2016 concert at Carnegie Hall.

(MR) I prioritize my to-do list and assign days and times to each item so that I'm constantly considering my schedule. Time at work is time spent working. I also delegate duties to my officers, choir aides, boosters, or associate director to help create group ownership. I set boundaries with parents and students regarding the expectations for our program and my job as the head director. I state in our handbook and tell them at our initial meetings that I walk away from email at 4 P.M. and they are not guaranteed an answer until the next work day. You'll get sucked in if you check work email from home. Accept that there will always be things left on the to-do list when you leave for the day, and that is okay!

(SA) When I leave the office I tell myself that I have the car ride home to decompress from work. When I park the car, work is done. Only occasionally will I come home and truly feel the need to tell my husband something about work. If I do need to talk about something, either good or bad, I allow myself five minutes to let it out and then it is time to move on. I also will not do any work at home unless it is an emergency, must be done tonight, and it couldn't get done at work.

How can teachers say no to extra commitments without appearing as if they aren't being a team player?

(TA) Building good relationships with administrators and other stakeholders is key. Make sure they are aware of your commitment to the well-being of the students. Administrators need to know that you support them, the school, and other activities in the school. When you get a request for a performance or a personal task that is too much and not good for the students, respond in terms of student time and what is best for the students. Given your established support and cooperation, administrators will know that you are not just trying to get out of doing your part.

(AN) Being a people pleaser, I'm terrible at saying no—I try to do everything that I can. However, I know the limits of my various ensembles, and if they aren't able to perform, I explain to my administrator what we are currently working toward and why we can't accommodate the (often last-minute) request. Be transparent about why you can't do something; explain that fulfilling this request will cause other priorities for your campus to suffer in quality. Offer an alternative; if the ensemble they asked for can't handle another event, suggest another ensemble that could.

(MR) Make a decision early in the year with your administrator about how many extra activities you can take on, keeping in mind a respectful balance of their time as well. Most teachers and administrators understand not wanting to take on a bunch of extra commitments when you explain that you can't reasonably ask that of your students.

We often hear that planning is key to greater job satisfaction. What's your approach to planning?

(TA) In addition to not putting things off that can be done right away, I keep lists of things that need to be done. I divide the tasks into what is more important and less important and into what needs to be done now and what can wait until the other things are done. I then work my way down the list. I put any task that I know I may forget to do on my computer's calendar and set it to give me a reminder. It may be a reminder 25 minutes from now or it may be a year from now. In the summer, I handle any logistics that can be accomplished ahead of time—literature selection and score study, roster, instrument inventory, calendar, and more.

(AN) I do much of my planning during the summer. I am currently in the middle of zeroing in on more efficient and effective planning through my Kodály coursework. While the focus of Kodály is on the elementary grade levels, I strongly recommend it for secondary teachers as well. Not only does it hone your aural skills, which is useful for all music teachers at all levels, but it also teaches efficient score study, vertical alignment, and individual lesson planning that is developmentally appropriate and addresses multiple learning styles.

(MR) I'm diligent about creating long-term and short-term plans for my classes. Once I select literature, I determine the sections of the piece (considering repetition or familiar patterns) and how long it will take me to teach each section. I create a long-term plan based on how many rehearsals we have prior to the concert. Then, daily planning is established from that long-term plan. During the summer, I listen to music and build a spreadsheet with title, composer/arranger, voicing, difficulty level, and initial notes on the piece to help with literature selection.

(SA) I plan the tasks I need to accomplish each day, week, month, semester, and year. I also set goals for my students and myself and plan accordingly. I make lots of lists as well as put things in my calendar to make sure I can keep to my plans and goals. In the summer, I update planning binders for each grading period with curriculum guidelines and goals, homework, worksheets, tests, scale sheets, warm-ups, etudes, and anything else they might need and I make notes on what to alter for the next year.

If someone wants to improve their work-life balance but doesn't know where to start, what advice would you offer?

(TA) I display this quote by Ludwig Wittgenstein outside my office door and offer it for anyone seeking change: "If life becomes hard to bear, we think of a change in our circumstances. But the most important and effective change, a change in our own attitude, hardly ever occurs to us, and the resolution to take such a step is very difficult for us."

(AN) Start with nutrition. It is still the most difficult for me to remain consistent with, but it is also where I see the biggest impact across all areas of my life. Even if taking a multivitamin and having a good breakfast is the best you can manage, that will help. Eventually you can expand to having better lunches and dinners too. I also recommend taking professional development courses like Kodály or Orff, or a conducting seminar. Being around other passionate music educators will really recharge your batteries and your skill set!

(MR) I think the best thing I ever did was take a step back to consider what I wanted my life to look like. Based on that, set boundaries or create structure that enables you to establish that lifestyle. Once you know what you want your life to look like, it will be much easier to see what is in the way. You can't fix a problem you don't understand!

(SA) Start the change with yourself! When you feel better about yourself you will have more energy and more drive to keep pushing your students and yourself to the next level.

Our thanks go to these four music educators for offering such valuable information on maintaining a better work-life balance. Throughout this volume, look for more stories like this to gain even more strategies that might work for you.