

# Students Can Continue to Choose Music

Today's students face an increasingly complex path to graduation. While opportunities to make choices and pursue their passions are indeed positive, what results can be confusing—to say the very least. School counselors are charged with helping students establish their paths and make critical choices about course selection and scheduling. Music educators often find that some students make choices without a full understanding of their options. Given this growing complexity, it is imperative that music educators become educated and active agents of the solution.

## Positive Working Relationships Go a Long Way

Being part of the solution means that music educators need to establish positive and productive working relationships with the school counseling team. With ever-shifting requirements and choices, a counselor's work has increased in its complexity and demand. The following is advice from some fine arts administrators about how to establish good rapport with counselors:

**Jackie deMontmollin, Denton ISD:** Be aware of the need to communicate proactively about the special challenges in your courses. For example, inform the counselor if an instrumental music course requires students to handle expensive, school-owned instruments. Make an appointment in advance of course selection to review various aspects of your courses. In addition to being informative, take the opportunity to help proctor tests that often are the counselor's responsibility.

**Joe Clark, Spring ISD:** One way to establish an authentic and personal working relationship with the lead counselor is to visit the counselor when you *don't* need something. Invite counselors and the supervising counselor to performances and thank them from the stage for all they do for the arts.

**Elizabeth Ortega-Ruiz, Corpus Christi ISD:** Show your appreciation to counselors in a myriad of ways: invite them to performances, ask them to perform with a group, include their name in your concert program list of people being thanked, send thank-you cards when they handle an issue, give them one of your program T-shirts, invite them to your end-of-year banquet, and more.

# A School Counselor's Perspective



*The following is from Sara Stringer, a former middle school band director and now school counselor at Arlington ISD. Read more from Stringer in her article "Maximize the Counselor's Impact on Your Program" on page 48.*

**What is the most important thing teachers can do to improve their relationship with the school counselor?** First, show that you have a stronger heart for the student than the program. Second, make your counselor feel valued and worthwhile to you and your students. Third, do your best not to make their job more difficult. Brainstorm new ideas and try new things, but don't make the counselor do all the heavy lifting. You are partners.

**What information can music teachers offer counselors to support their advising of students?** Treat the counselor as a parent. *What information do you want parents to have? Dates of events? Information on how to select an instrument?* Also, ask the counselor about the most common reasons students give for not wanting to join or continue. What information do you have that could help the counselor during that moment when the student says they don't want to be in the music class anymore? If the reason is related to fees, your district may have a way to help students that counselors are not aware of. If the reason is related to time commitment, let the counselor know ways you can work with students to help them resolve conflicts.

**Starting in January, what can teachers do to help inform and support counselors as they start working to schedule students for 2018–2019?** During registration season, counselors are likely placing students in your program's various levels of ensembles. Make their job easier by supplying a preliminary list of forecasted placements for the next school year so the data for staffing is at least close to accurate. Make sure your counselor understands clearly that you will send an updated placement list in May following auditions. If you supply a good preliminary list, there should be few changes, and this will relieve some of the work demand. Also, if your counselor requests reports or documents from you, complete them on time to help make the registration process move more smoothly for you and your students.

**Jeff Bradford, Richardson ISD:** As a high school teacher, I visited with our lead counselor every few weeks. I asked for feedback on how I could make counselors' lives easier, and I asked to be included on meetings that might affect my students and their choices. I also educated counselors about the importance of participating in a music program, beyond the credit earned. Sometimes we need to make it more personal and about the *why* for the student. With the time we spend and relationships we build with our students, it's our job to share those stories with counselors and to advocate for the students and the programs we teach.

In my final years at Lake Highlands HS, I convinced our lead counselor to let me sit in on their cluster counseling staff vertical team meetings. I didn't speak at first—I just listened. As time passed, I sought to understand the demands placed on them. I found they were often doing exactly what they were directed to do, which helped me understand how to better serve at the next level.

The biggest thing I've noticed is there is a lack of communication about timelines for rollouts, new programs, and expectations in the cluster or district. Most counselors I've worked with are simply trying to do what they know is right, sometimes with inaccurate information or lack of support to properly guide students in the arts. When I stopped fighting people and sought to understand, life got much better.

As an administrator, I schedule opportunities to speak with all counselors across the district every year. I thank them and work to build a sense of mutual work for the best interest of students. I outline the timeline for all arts organizations, specifically discussing assessments for our areas and how we recruit. When they have more information about how things work, they usually ask questions, and this leads to a more productive partnership. Finally, I provide them my contact information and ask them to reach out to me for support or clarity.

**Shawn Bell, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD:** Work with counselors well in advance of deadlines. Establish a reputation of being organized and strategic, rather than being a last-minute, sky-is-falling teacher. Overall, I strongly believe that the success of these challenges depends on relationships. When strong relationships exist, there tends to be a mutual respect and

commitment to find solutions that are best for students.

**Michael Ouellete, Katy ISD:** I worked with our counseling program to design a brochure that outlines each of the plans and endorsements (available at [www.tmea.org/stayinmusic](http://www.tmea.org/stayinmusic)). In addition, I hold staff development with fine arts teachers so they understand how to help students use the required and elective spots to earn an endorsement while staying in their arts program all four years.

**James Drew, Fort Bend ISD:** I created a PowerPoint presentation for a meeting with counselors. This includes several pair-share slides designed to incite productive conversations about the varying perspectives of topics that affect our students' choices. Counselors pair up and discuss the opposing views of specific topics. The goal is to support conversation that can lead to a greater understanding of the many sides of each issue.

**David Jennison, Round Rock ISD:** Many of our district decisions on inform-

ing students and families about course offerings are made at the campus level. Thus, we encourage educators to build strong relationships with campus administrators and counselors and get involved in the course selection process as much as appropriate. Enrichment versus foundation course options can be confusing for families, and sometimes for counselors as well. To help both, we distribute a brochure highlighting the benefits of fine arts participation. This document sets the stage for efforts by our teachers to engage and retain students (available at [www.tmea.org/stayinmusic](http://www.tmea.org/stayinmusic)).

**Jenny Parry, Del Valle ISD:** Each year, I try something new to help improve our working relationship. I have taken district counselors on a walking tour of active fine arts classes and then treated them to lunch in the school's culinary arts café. During lunch, I answered questions and talked about highlights for each program. I have presented course catalog information on all fine arts programs during a counselors'

meeting. I explained our recruiting plan and our unique master scheduling issues. I collaborated with the Student Support Services Department to create a chart that identifies the extracurricular activities students are able to participate in while enrolled in ECHS. I also have distributed copies of “The Benefits of Music Education” advocacy piece (available at [www.tmea.org/advocacymaterials](http://www.tmea.org/advocacymaterials)).

**Abby Crawford, Castleberry ISD:** The most challenging time of year for counselors is the last two weeks of July through the first two weeks of school. They are pulled many directions and aren’t told enough how much they are valued. Offer your help, bring them a treat, and recognize them during National School Counseling Week (February 5–9 this year). When you need something, offer a solution; don’t just present the problem. Above all, counselors enjoy building work relationships as much as directors do—spend the rest of the year developing this camaraderie.

### Helping Students Do It All

Many schools have sample graduation plans to show students how they can pursue various endorsements while staying in a music program all four years and how they can participate in athletics and fine arts all four years (go to [www.tmea.org/stayinmusic](http://www.tmea.org/stayinmusic) to download samples provided by the fine arts administrators who participated in this article). Some schools have established flexibility in their schedule so that diverse interests can be supported. The following are how some districts ensure students and counselors understand the options:

**Pat Leaverton, Fort Worth ISD:** I have found one of the keys is to talk with the eighth-grade instrumental students before the high school counselors visit them to ensure they understand how the sequence of music classes fits into their four-year plan. I tell the eighth graders about graduation plans, credits, endorsements, and the importance that college admittance staff places on continued participation in arts.

**Danny White, McKinney ISD:** Probably the most important talking point with parents, students, and counselors related to the endorsements is that electives are open to student choice, regardless of the declared endorsement. No one should dictate to students what elective courses are best for them to take.

**Elizabeth Ortega-Ruiz, Corpus Christi ISD:** Create a brochure for counselors to give students about participating in fine arts all four years (make it a fine arts department group effort). Ask to attend parent/student meetings at the middle school when counselors are going to speak about the endorsement options, and offer the counselors a digital presentation about sequential fine arts course participation.

**Joe Clark, Spring ISD:** The information that we will ultimately provide all counselors we first share with just a few counselors to gain their feedback. This helps us

gain buy-in from that small group while helping ensure our information is easy to understand. Once we have a common understanding of how this information will look in our district, we collaborate with the counselors at all levels (district and campus) so that everyone is speaking the same language and using the same district materials in communication with students.

**Sara Stringer, Arlington ISD School Counselor:** We personalize every graduation plan to address student interests and goals. I meet with students individually



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**TO SCHEDULE AN AUDITION**  
Michelle Morrison  
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**UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIPS**  
Dr. Michael Hix [mhix@unm.edu](mailto:mhix@unm.edu)

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# University Admission Is About More Than Your GPA



*The following story is from Westlake HS Director of Bands Kerry Taylor: About 10 years ago, Westlake had two drum majors who were very strong musicians and high achievers in their other academic courses. As juniors, one had his heart set on attending an Ivy League school and the other was destined to follow her family's legacy at the University of Texas. Daniel received a lot of pressure from his parents to drop band because they believed it limited his study time for "more serious courses" and was bringing down his GPA (seemingly putting him at a disadvantage when compared to other students). Daniel continued in music and ultimately became our head drum major. When acceptance letters came out, Daniel was excited to turn down his offers from several Ivy League schools and accept an offer from Stanford. His parents were very pleased.*

Several days later the news hit that our valedictorian wasn't accepted to his number-one choice—Stanford University. Perplexed, our College and Career Counselor called the Stanford admissions office to find out why the valedictorian of an academically recognized high school wasn't admitted. Our counselor later told me that the admissions office said they limit the number of offers per out-of-state high schools, and Westlake's limit was two. One went to an outstanding athlete whom their swim coach wanted; the other offer went to the other most promising and outstanding student—the *drum major of the band*.

I have repeated this story to my high-achieving students over the years, and I have heard our counseling staff share it with the freshman class. That Senior Counselor became one of my best recruiters!

## **As I've watched our students gain admission, I've learned the following:**

- Many of our students do not go to in-state schools, and most out-of-state schools do not use high school ranking to determine admission.
- Almost all out-of-state institutions use their own system to determine GPA or academic rigor. Weighting systems and Texas GPAs are often ignored. This is plainly stated on their admission websites.
- More universities are interested in student portfolios (cumulative work product) and essays (communication skills) to determine admission rather than GPA, high school rank, and standardized test scores.
- Even the University of Texas recognizes that work product and performance are better indicators of success in certain areas, such as fine arts, than class rank or standardized test scores.

*Be sure to read the article "Helping Students Pursue Their Passion" by Sundas Mohi on page 67. Her personal story underscores these points and is another valuable story to share with students struggling with these GPA/class rank issues.*

throughout their high school careers to establish an initial game plan for meeting graduation requirements and to adjust it along the way. When students present requests that exceed our eight-period capacity, I inform them of a variety of options so that they can take what they want.

I always take them back to the basics: high school students must graduate with 26 credits and an endorsement if they want to apply to four-year universities. While

students may be interested in more than one endorsement, the state requires completion of only one. With four credits of a music course, they can earn the Arts & Humanities Endorsement. While many students will have room in their schedules for another endorsement, they should never feel pressured to complete more than one.

Our school district supports all the available endorsements; however, some districts focus only on one—Multidisciplinary.

This endorsement is closest to the former "4×4" plan. In the Multidisciplinary Endorsement, fine arts play an expanded role to the one credit required to graduate. In addition to completing the 22 credits of the basic graduation plan, students may earn the Multidisciplinary Endorsement by completing four credits in AP, IB, or dual-credit courses selected from the following: English, Math, Social Studies, Languages other than English, or *Fine Arts*. In some metropolitan school districts, fine arts departments are already looking for ways to bring in more AP, IB, and dual-credit fine arts courses to support students wanting to stay in their fine arts elective.

## **Managing the GPA and Class Rank Race**

Many students feel pressure to be at the top of their class, with a GPA that reflects this position. In some cases, this leads students to drop out of a music program because the course doesn't offer a weighted grade. Many music educators struggle with this since their best musicians also often have a goal to be at the top of the class, believing this will help them gain admission to their top university choice. Districts have responded to this quandary in a variety of ways, including the following:

**Joe Clark, Spring ISD:** We have a weighted-credit option (as well as an unweighted option) for several of our fine arts courses for juniors and seniors in advanced ensembles. The weighted option includes additional requirements that are intended to match the rigor of AP and pre-AP courses and prepare students for college-level courses. We borrowed this model with permission from Allen ISD and presented the plan to the school board for approval.

**Shawn Bell, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD:** Although this is a continuing struggle, our district offers a pass/fail option in music classes for juniors and seniors who are competing for class rank.

**Danny White, McKinney ISD:** We currently have a program in place where students in their junior and senior years can opt to take fine arts courses on a GPA-exempt basis. We have debated about whether to move toward providing honors credit in our top ensembles. (Go to [www.tmea.org/stayinmusic](http://www.tmea.org/stayinmusic) for their GPA-exempt option brochure.)


**Kerry Taylor, Westlake HS, Eanes ISD:** Westlake HS has implemented two rules that, in my opinion, have done much to alleviate some of the pressures on high achieving students as they try to balance their love for fine arts subjects and an overt emphasis on GPA in the college admission race.

The first is that every student is required to have a minimum of four regular-level credits, three of which must be completed prior to their senior year, averaged into their GPA. This allows students in four-year programs to be on a more level playing field with those who are trying to play the GPA game. For our most serious music students, at least one of their music courses not receiving a weighted GPA multiplier per year will not hurt their GPA when compared with others. Our administration is in the process of exploring the future

possibility of expanding the requirement of regular credit courses to six, and possibly eight.

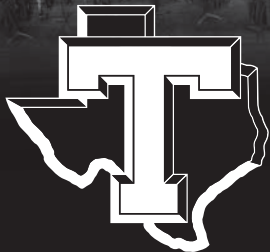
The second change that has proven helpful to fine arts students and the student body at large is that we publish only the top 10% when ranking a graduating class. This has lessened the importance of a class ranking beyond the top 10% and raised the value of a student's body of work or portfolio. As a result, more of our students are being accepted into highly respected Texas schools that may have some sort of limiting admission policy based on high school GPAs.

**Sara Stringer, Arlington ISD School Counselor:** Arlington ISD has an Advanced Honors Credit grade point scale for students who participate in fine arts. It gives students an opportunity for a more rigorous curriculum in fine arts

programs for college readiness and provides advanced credit for the higher-level fine arts achievement within a curriculum structure. Advanced credit is available to all students in grades 10–12 in sections of band, choir, orchestra, and theatre. Advanced points are earned with the completion of Advanced Honors course requirements, designed to allow students the opportunity to extend their education in an enriched, independent curriculum for college readiness. All assignments are completed independently with a time line provided by the instructor. 

TMEA thanks these contributors for sharing strategies. Download brochures and sample graduation plans these districts use, at [www.tmea.org/stayinmusic](http://www.tmea.org/stayinmusic).

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