



# Your First Six Months: Survive and Thrive

by David M. Hedgecoth and Ryan S. Kelly

**I**f you're a recent college graduate beginning in this amazing career, congratulations! This is definitely an exciting time of growth and opportunity. In the days and weeks ahead, you'll spend many hours preparing music, creating handbooks, and setting up your music rooms. These activities can build excitement and instill a sense of ownership over the direction of your new music program. There will also be numerous facets of your position over which you may not have complete control. As you learn more about your students (and their parents) keep the following in mind to help you better understand them and to provide some insight into understanding and nurturing the most important person in your new program—you.

## **Your Students (Who May Not Like You)**

You simply can't make everyone happy. There will be days when it's clear that some students are driven by their continued admiration for your predecessor. Regardless of how students may judge you, being fully prepared to teach every class is an important step in earning their respect. Be aware of how your predecessor managed the class. What types of warm-ups were used? How do the students enter the room? What types of music have the students performed in the past? Select

music you know the students will respond to. Be aware, your musical standards may not align with theirs. Help them reach your standard by teaching through the repertoire that they enjoy performing. How can you build on musical practices already in place? Remember, be genuine. Students will know if you are trying to portray yourself as someone you aren't.

Soliciting feedback is another important element of communication. Having a dialogue with parents, administrators, and students on a regular basis will provide a format for open and honest communication. This will allow for a more accurate external assessment regarding the health of the program.

## **Communicating with Parents**

The number-one thing that parents want most is what's best for their kid. This presents a problem only when a parent either doesn't believe that you want what's best for their kid or what's best for their kid doesn't align with what's best for your class or your program. When communicating with parents, remember to keep this perspective in mind, and speak with empathy and appreciation for their point of view. Seeing parents' concerns through their eyes will help you find a better starting place for a conversation about how to reach mutual understanding. Being defensive or offering justifications for

your decision-making can sometimes end up being counterproductive.

In conversations with parents, inexperienced teachers often act on the instinct to prove they really do know what they're talking about. However, in proving your expertise, you'll often miss the mark of addressing parent concern number one—what's best for their kid. If you're worried that a parent is becoming overly confrontational or if the issue seems more difficult than you're comfortable handling alone, make sure to bring in an administrator who can support your efforts and help you establish more effective communication.

## **Communicating with Administrators**

Just as parents want what's best for their kid, administrators want an excellent teacher-musician who is independently successful, highly organized, and proactively communicative. Making sure this describes you will minimize any conflict you may have with your administration, and often it will help align them with your vision for the music program.

It's important when asking your administrators for additional support for your program that you understand how they perceive your music program, and also how they perceive you as a teacher. (These two perceptions are often closely aligned.) If you believe that your administration

doesn't view your program as valuable or worthy of investment, evaluate your situation objectively, and be realistic about the role your program plays in the greater context of your school's overall success. When the time comes to address your administration or ask them for something you need, be prepared to separate your convictions from your emotions. Speaking truth to power can be intimidating, but don't resort to emotional emphasis to help you achieve your goals. Professionalism and poise are essential qualities of every educator—no matter how challenging the circumstances! (For even more guidance about working with your administrators, read the article on page 30).

### Facing Your Fears

Know thyself. You are a professional. Accept that there are still numerous ways you can grow as a musician and teacher. Moments of self-reflection will provide you opportunities to answer these questions: What is going well? What is not? Are the current challenges a student issue or a teacher issue? We encourage you to invite guests into your music room. Whether they guest-teach or observe your teaching, you will gain insight into your strengths and areas for improvement.

Remember that professional development should be a year-round, career-long endeavor—one that extends beyond an annual state conference. Talk with mentors, observe master teachers, peruse the most recent text on music teaching, attend a professional concert, and more. The list of potential professional development opportunities is endless. The key here is that you take action. Be brave. Stepping beyond one's comfort zone is essential for personal and professional growth.

### Avoiding Burnout

Fatigue happens. As a first-year teacher, you will spend many hours preparing for the next class, event, performance, and more. Everything will take longer in your first year, so remember that there will always be more work to do and that you need to take time for yourself. Failing to do so will result in professional burnout, which can lead to personal unhappiness. Work to live a balanced life. What non-musical interests do you have? What musical outlets, apart from your school music program, are available to you? What makes you happy? How do you recharge?

Answering these questions is a critical step in preserving (and restoring) your mental, physical, and emotional energy.

In the technology age in which we live, information overload is the norm. Allowing yourself time to disconnect and refocus is invaluable for maintaining mental health. Several authors have written on this topic. We suggest the following: Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*; Daniel Goleman, *Focus, The Hidden Driver of Excellence*; Daniel Levitan, *The Organized Mind*.

For more guidance on this topic from other TMEA members, read the article on page 22. Also, go to [www.tmea.org/balanceresults](http://www.tmea.org/balanceresults) for results of a recent survey of TMEA members. Learn strategies our members use to achieve better work-life balance.

### Finding Your Passion

What gets you excited about your work? What do you love most about your job? Chances are high that some part of your answer revolves around your students and their successes. Don't ever forget that the biggest personal return on investment in this profession comes from your work with your students, and not from anywhere else. It's all too easy to become absorbed in an endless stack of papers, an overflowing email inbox, and fundraisers every other month. Your primary responsibility is to be the best musi-

cian and teacher you can possibly be—not the best accountant, email correspondent, or travel agent!

Invest the greatest amount of energy and time on those you teach, and the odds are in your favor that you will continue to cultivate a love of teaching music. It's also important to remember that you were a musician long before you became a teacher. Find opportunities to play, sing, or otherwise share your artistic talents with others, even if it's outside your school. The greatest rewards in music come from sharing it with other people, so find opportunities to do this often.

The many new experiences that come from starting a career in teaching music can seem overwhelming, daunting, or exhausting. And it's because they will be—unless you are able to put things in a healthy perspective. See problems and challenges for what they are rather than what they seem to be, and remember to connect with that which inspired you to enter this profession in the first place. Don't forget that you are getting paid to spend every day teaching and making music with young people. When you view what we do in the broader context of the professional world, how lucky we are to be able to say that!

David M. Hedgecoth is an assistant professor of music education at the Ohio State University. Ryan S. Kelly is the assistant director of bands and associate director of the Longhorn Band at the University of Texas at Austin.



# Everyone can use a hand

The TMEA Mentoring Network is 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](http://www.tmea.org/mentor)