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**5 S.M.A.R.T. Ideas to Help Retain (This Year's) Beginners:**
***A Primer for High School and Middle School Directors***

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This article is written as a follow-up to the session provided at the **2024 Wisconsin State Music Conference** held in Madison, Wisconsin, on Thursday, October 24, 2024, by Marcia Neel. It was generously sponsored by Hal Leonard in support of the five (5) Wisconsin Strong Music Retailers including Brass Bell, Heid Music, Knapton Musik Knotes, Ward Brodt, and White House of Music Music Service. Additional strategic partners include the Music Achievement Council, NAMM Foundation, National Association of School Music Dealers, and the National Federation of High School State Associations (NFHS).

The S.M.A.R.T. approach focuses instruction and experience around SUCCESS, MODELING, ACTIVITIES, REFLECTION, and TRUST as these five elements seem to bring our newbies back for more. Although designed for instrumental music educators, these strategies work for any elective music ensemble so feel free to share this information liberally.

**SUCCESS**

Our beginners want to be successful; their parents want them to be successful, and of course, we directors also want our students to be successful so what must be done to ensure that we put students in the position to experience SUCCESS.

a. They must perform early and often which is why the scripted First Performance Day of Celebration Concert *(*download the free toolkit at nammfoundation.org/FPNDOC) is THE MOST IMPACTFUL TOOL to get the students off and running in a positive direction as they advance from beginning student to "member of the band." Remember--it's not about providing a PERFECT performance in these early weeks. It's about providing the opportunity for our students to discover the joy of music-making as a group. Treat each performance as if you were conducting the Chicago Symphony. There is nothing else like it and parents will soon see how much their children are benefitting from these experiences.

b. And speaking of parents, help them to discover the joy of music-making while engaging them in the learning process as well. Challenge your beginning students to teach their instrument to one of their parents then have the parents perform several selections (exercises) from the method book in the Spring Concert. The parents will enjoy the experience and your beginners will learn so much more about their instrument because they are having to teach it to someone else.

c. Did you know up to 60% of our beginning students drop out after their first year? One of the most overlooked aspects of teaching beginners is teaching parents how to help their beginning students succeed. NFHS, the National Federation of High Schools, partnered with author Anthony Mazzocchi to provide a New Music Parent Course at bit.ly/NFHSNewMusicParent. This course is

designed to provide an overview of best practices that parents can learn to help their respective students learn the fundamentals when they begin playing an instrument. It's a super resource so be sure to share it appropriately.

**MODELING**

Research from the Barna Group tells us that after family members, young teens emulate those they know best. They seek to maintain friendships with older peers who they often choose to imitate. We know that middle school music students admire their older music peers and that high school music students develop their leadership skills by mentoring younger students so a built-in opportunity for modeling already exists.

a. High school students can demonstrate to the younger students and their parents what their future holds when they remain in the program. So, ask high school students to help teach private lessons after school, coach sectionals, and serve as leaders by assisting the program activities and events at their former middle school.

b. Some districts have initiated a free summer camp program for beginning students to prepare them for the coming school year and this is a perfect opportunity to engage high school students to serve as counselors, performing artists, and instructors.

c. Older students could show that they care about the younger musicians continuing on in music by sending congratulatory notes to students of like instruments after their performances. A simple email or even a hand-written card that would arrive in the U.S. mail that says, *Congratulations on your performance in your* [first concert, Spring Concert, Solo & Ensemble Festival, etc.]. *You'll enjoy your high school performances even more so keep up the good work. Best, Haydn High School Trumpet Section*, would be so encouraging and certainly valued by the novice musicians.

d. A vision board will help beginners visualize their own futures so come up with examples of older students enjoying their music-making and place your vision board in a central location in the rehearsal room. Using photos of your older middle school students as well as high school and college students will work well as it shows the various stages of musical growth (and smiling faces).

e. Beginning students have no idea what their chosen instrument can do in the hands of a master musician. Share opportunities where students and parents can observe this in your area. Many local libraries and universities offer free concerts of touring ensembles. Ask your parents to take their children to several of these over the course of the year and ensure that the students sit right down in front so that they can clearly see their instrument in action. After the performance, parents should take their students backstage to visit with the skilled musician who played their child's instrument. Professional musicians love meeting with beginners. After all, they were there at one time themselves!

**ACTIVITIES**

Students of all ages thrive from rewarding experiences which is what keeps them coming back for more so plan both musical and non-musical events that will allow your beginners to feel good about themselves.

a. It's a big deal when athletes sign to attend the college of their choice so why not use this concept and have your beginning students participate in a Signing Day event and video the process to share on social media if your district will allow. Host the event at your school and promote it heavily by inviting all of the students who have been recruited into your program along with their parents and an administrator from your school. Set up a table and have students come forward one at a time to sit down and sign their "intent" letter and receive a ball cap, t-shirt, or other item with an appropriate logo. Here's an example of how this might be accomplished virtually as well. https://youtu.be/J4bTw5uyiUY

b. Engage this year's beginners in the recruitment process for next year. There is nothing like seeing your name in lights so create a poster format then ask each of your current beginners to provide their own reason for being in your program and use their school photo to make the poster. Make two (2) hard copies of each poster--one for the student to keep and one to put up around the school where next year's beginners are enrolled.

c. A service project teaches young people that they can make a difference in the lives of others while also boosting their own sense of well-being. Organizing a food, clothing, or book drive for younger children allows us to realize how fortunate we are in our own lives. Performing for a nursing home, hospital, or senior center teaches students that when shared, the gift of music is is appreciated by everyone! Another project might be to have students write thank you notes during Teacher Appreciation Week to the (music) teachers they have had in the past. Travis Pardee, Director of Band at Foothill High School in Henderson, NV, has had students create musical holiday cards to send to their former teachers with them performing in sectional chamber groups. (View video at https://bit.ly/3RJsbTK) What a wonderful gesture this would be and just imagine what an impact it would certainly make on the receiving teacher!

**REFLECTION**

Without knowing it cognitively, beginning students in all endeavors are continually assessing what they are getting their endeavors, so it is vital that we provide opportunities for them to reflect upon the benefits of music-making. As we know, the beginning of any skill-based activity -- sports, music, etc. -- is the most challenging. Once students acquire the fundamental skills required to get past the beginning stages, they soon discover the joy that music-making brings into their lives. For this reason, it is important to have our beginners perform as often as possible even if simply performing from their method books. It gives them that sense of accomplishment that we all seek even as adults. Below are some suggestions that will help our newer musicians realize how much music-making impacts their daily lives and enriches them personally.

a. After each performance, build a word cloud by asking each student to choose one word that best describes how they feel. Use any insta-poll program (Poll Everywhere works great) or simply have them write their word on a piece of paper then tally the words as they are submitted. They will soon see how music-making also impacts their peers as well and this helps build and enhance the ensemble climate.

b. Ask your students to complete five sentence stems which start with, “Music makes the difference because. . .” This allows them to reflect upon the experiences they have been having as a participant in the ensemble. Directors are often surprised to read the heart-felt writings of their beginners. In many cases, it will lead us to understand more about our students as individuals.

**TRUST**

Trust, or the lack of it, is the result of relationships. In general, adolescents struggle with finding their place as they try to fit in with their peers socially while at the same time learning to express themselves as individuals. Providing young people with a secure setting where they are cared for and supported while they are learning how to be part of an organization that achieves more as a group than as an assembly of individuals, is of great benefit. Students learn self-discipline,

teamwork, responsibility, resilience, commitment, time management, productivity, multi-tasking, empathy, communication, respect for others, leadership, problem-solving, and how to present oneself. Perhaps there is a way in which these characteristics can be made more evident through class discussions or by referencing them in rehearsal. Sometimes we just have to point out the obvious.

a. Choose appropriate literature. Students trust their directors because good directors put their students in a situation that will help them realize success. It's important to remember that the level of music being performed with our beginners must be chosen to enhance the experience that they and their parents are getting out of it. Over-programming is a retention killer because students are constantly struggling to play something that is beyond their ability.

b. Challenge your beginning students to write 5-note melodies that you might choose to perform in a premiere at some point during the year. While also delving into composition, activities like these build appreciation for and trust in the ensemble. This will always be THEIR piece of music that was composed collectively.

c. Provide recognition and reinforcement because it bolsters confidence. Acknowledge every student at some point with some sort of award and provide a certificate or have their name read over the loudspeaker. You'd be amazed how much this means to our beginners who are trying to find their place in the social maze of adolescence.

d. Display an array of photos of your students all over the rehearsal room. These could be from performances, fundraisers, social events, community service projects, and partnership events with the high school program. This shows the students that each and every one of them is valued.

Kids are just amazing! We have the ability, the duty really, to "flip the switch" that can set the course of their lives on the path to a more fulfilling existence. So please also remember this final thought...it's YOUR ENTHUSIASM that matters! We must be enthusiastic about all that we do so that our efforts result in keeping our students involved in active music-making.

We want this year's beginners to be life-long music-makers or at the very least, life-long music-enjoyers! We want them to begin their adult lives with these experiences and to know how to build relationships and collaborate to build great things. We can ensure they get these skills in our music programs but the responsibility ultimately rests with us so now is the time. Our students need what we have to offer more than ever before. Know that you are valued and that your work changes lives. Onward and upward!

*About Marcia Neel*

*Marcia serves as president of Music Education Consultants, Inc., a consortium of music education professionals which works with a variety of educational organizations, arts associations, and school districts to foster the growth and breadth of standards-based, articulated music education programs. Neel has been named Senior Director of Education for Yamaha Corporation of America and subsequently, a Yamaha Master Educator. She also serves as Education Advisor to the Music Achievement Council, a 501(c)(6) organization whose sole purpose is to assist directors in recruiting and retaining students in instrumental music programs through effective professional development programs. Marcia also serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Percussive Arts Society.*

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