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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 provided as a follow-up to the session provided by Marcia Neel at **VAMEA** being held in Norfolk, on Saturday, November 22, 2025. The presentation was generously sponsored in cooperation with the Music Achievement Council (MAC) non-profit organization; the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) Foundation; the Virginia members of the National Association of School Music Dealers (NASMD); and the National Federation of High School State Associations (NFHS).

Retention is the heartbeat of a thriving music program. Research reminds us that as many as sixty percent of beginners may not continue into their second year, a sobering reality that underscores the urgency of intentional, student-centered approaches. Retention is not simply about keeping up the numbers; it is about ensuring that every student—regardless of cultural background, financial situation, or ability—finds a sense of belonging in our programs.

The framework we are exploring is built on five guiding principles: Success, Modeling, Activities, Reflection, and Trust. Known as S.M.A.R.T., this approach is enriched by an equity-driven perspective that intentionally weaves Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA) into each idea. Taken together, these strategies align with the NC Essential Music Standards and the National Core Arts Standards, offering directors practical ways to create programs where all students can thrive.

SUCCESS

For students and their families, the first measure of success often comes through performance. Directors can set the stage by creating opportunities for beginners to perform early and often. Programs like the scripted, customizable *First Performance Day of Celebration* concert *(*download the free toolkit at nammfoundation.org/FPNDOC) provides a structure in which students quickly shift from "new learners" to "members of the band." These performances are not about perfection but about cultivating joy and belonging through shared music-making simply by playing chosen exercises from their method book.

True success, however, must be accessible to every student. Repertoire choices matter; by incorporating culturally relevant works that represent diverse traditions, we allow students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Even simple pieces, such as what can be found in Anne McGinty's *Folk Song Trilogy* (grade 1½) can affirm cultural identities while keeping the music within reach of beginning ensembles.

Success is also tied to equity. Directors can work with local music dealers, community partners and nonprofit organizations to ensure that instruments are available to all, breaking down the barriers that too often determine who gets to participate. Finally, families must be engaged in the process. When parents are invited into their child's journey—whether by learning to play a simple exercise themselves or by accessing resources like the NFHS *New Music Parent Course* available through NFHS at bit.ly/NFHSNewMusicParent—they become advocates who reinforce success at home.

MODELING

Adolescents are natural imitators, learning as much from those they admire as from formal instruction. This makes modeling a powerful tool for retention. Older students provide students and their parents living proof of what lies ahead. When high school musicians return to mentor middle schoolers through sectionals or camps, they not only strengthen their own leadership but also spark inspiration in younger players.

Representation matters here as well. Students must be able to see themselves in the program, and that includes seeing role models from diverse backgrounds. Inviting guest artists and clinicians who bring a range of cultural and musical experiences breaks stereotypes and widens students' visions of what a musician can be.

Directors can reinforce these ideas with vision boards that display images of musicians at different stages—from peers to professionals—offering tangible reminders of the possibilities that lie ahead. Even simple gestures, such as congratulatory notes from older students to younger ones after performances, weave threads of encouragement and representation that keep students connected to the program while at the same time, strengthening the leadership qualities among the more advanced players.

ACTIVITIES

Music-making thrives on engagement, and so do students. Beyond the rehearsal room, activities give students personal reasons to stay committed. One powerful example is the creation of a Signing Day event, where future beginners formally declare their intent to join band or orchestra to a current beginner. Much like athletes who celebrate their college decisions, young musicians relish the recognition of their choice to be part of something meaningful. 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

Directors can show how important their novices are by creating a template where current students could create their own posters sharing why they love the program by writing a brief statement. This activity not only strengthens their own sense of belonging but also inspires the next generation.

Equally important are opportunities for students to see their role in the larger community. When ensembles perform at cultural festivals, senior centers, or places of worship, they validate the idea that music is meant to be shared. These performances extend beyond entertainment; they affirm cultural identities and forge bonds between families, schools, and communities.

Service projects show 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. Another project might be to have students write thank you notes during Teacher Appreciation Week to the educators 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 showing 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

In the earliest stages of learning, students are constantly assessing the value of their efforts. Directors can guide this process by creating structured opportunities for reflection. After performances, for example, students might be asked to describe their feelings in a single word, which can then be collected into a word cloud. 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.

Reflection can also be more personal. Journaling prompts such as “Music makes the difference because…” allow students to articulate their growing understanding of music’s impact on their lives. For some, these reflections uncover cultural connections or personal triumphs that deepen their commitment. Others may wish to express themselves through composition or improvisation, creating short pieces that reflect their identity. In these moments, music education moves beyond

performance into the realm of personal expression, which is often the most powerful form of retention.

TRUST

At the core of retention lies trust—the belief that the music program is a safe, supportive space where every student belongs. Building this trust requires thoughtful attention to literature, ensuring that students are challenged but never overwhelmed. Over-programming can erode confidence, while appropriately leveled repertoire strengthens it.

Trust also grows through inclusive norms. When directors establish clear expectations that celebrate diversity and respect, students learn that their voices matter. Leadership opportunities should be distributed equitably, with extra support given to those who may not naturally self-advocate. 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 to the students what is obvious to us as music educators.

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.

Recognition is equally powerful. Displaying photos of students, acknowledging individual contributions, or celebrating achievements both large and small reinforces the message that every student has a valued place in the ensemble. Try to acknowledge every beginner individually over the course of the year 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 youngest music-makers who are trying to find their place in the social maze of adolescence.

Make a point to 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.

Technology can amplify this impact, making resources accessible and highlighting student voices through multimedia and social platforms.

Conclusion

Ultimately, retention is about far more than keeping students enrolled. It is about encouraging music-making and cultivating the love of music intrinsically which, when combined, lead to a more fulfilling life as an adult. Think of your own life. How would it be different if you had never had the experience of music-making with your peers. When we expand the S.M.A.R.T. framework to intentionally include DEIA practices, we do more than increase retention—we transform our programs into spaces of belonging and artistry. Every student, regardless of background or ability, deserves the chance to succeed, to be represented, to connect through meaningful activities, to reflect on their growth, and to trust in the community that surrounds them.

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 Neel is a distinguished leader in the field of music education. As the president of Music Education Consultants, Inc., she oversees a consortium of music education professionals dedicated to enhancing standards-based, articulated music programs in collaboration with educational organizations, arts associations, and school districts.

She served as Coordinator of Secondary Fine Arts for the Clark County School District headquartered in Las Vegas and supervised the fastest growing Music Education Program in the country for 14 years. Through aggressive recruitment and retention priorities, the district grew to serve over 70,000 students in a plethora of secondary elective music offerings which were expanded through her thought leadership in curriculum design. The CCSD Mariachi Program alone now serves over 8,200 students—the vast majority of which are students who are new to the district's comprehensive music program. Her passion and expertise for recruiting, retaining, mentoring, and caring for young music educators, as well as their young music-makers, resulted in the hiring of as many as 50 new music educators annually during her administrative term. Today, the CCSD employs over 550 music teachers.

In her role as Senior Director of Education for Yamaha Corporation of America and as a Yamaha Master Educator, Marcia plays a pivotal role in promoting innovative teaching strategies and resources for music educators. Additionally, she serves as the Education Advisor to the Music Achievement Council, a nonprofit organization focused on supporting music educators with tools and professional development for recruiting and retaining students in instrumental music programs. Marcia's work highlights her passion for empowering educators through professional development programs, advocacy for music education, and initiatives aimed at fostering long-term growth and engagement in school music programs.

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