

Marcia's Top Twelve Tips for New(er) Teachers
Marcia Neel

One of my greatest pleasures is working collegiate music education majors. They are eager to start their careers yet a little skittish about what is to come. Each year at Bands of America Grand Nationals, I get the opportunity to visit with a large number of music ed majors who choose to attend this pinnacle event. Through a highly organized “meet the experts” speed-dating type of experience, these students get the opportunity to get up-close-and-personal with highly-regarded music education professionals who are there to answer questions and provide advice as requested by the individual students.

At this year's event, I was able to address the full cadre of participants to share what has come to be known as Marcia's Baker's Dozen of Tips for New Teachers so I thought it might be helpful to share the first half of them in this month's publication.

1. **Don't make assumptions** about what your newly inherited students know and are able to do. Esteemed educator, Herman Knoll, shares that the first rule is to “take students from where they are.” When exiting from college, we often assume that we can simply ask students to play a Bb scale on day one and that they will know what that means. If they don't, this is where you would start. Don't view this as a bad thing, simply think of it as an opportunity to set a standard.
2. **Be prepared and be competent.** Make and keep professional development a priority. This is YOUR career, and YOU are the ONLY person responsible for learning how to make more of an impact on your students. Knoll also shares that, “If you want to drive 500 miles to get to a clinic, do it! You're only going to get better or get worse so choose to make yourself better.” No truer words were ever spoken!
3. **Set a routine** so that every student knows what the formalities are at the beginning of each class/rehearsal. It's either a routine or it's chaos. Learning will take place in an organized setting where students know the expectations of the instructor no matter the subject taught. One of the best middle school directors I know required all of his beginners to come into class and take their seats by the tardy bell. Students were expected to sit quietly while the director stood in front to give very specific instructions. He would use a 3-step procedure to start class by dismissing them one row at a time to get their instruments (in their cases); put them on the floor in front of them unopened; then finally assemble them. Thus, row one would be instructed to get their cased instrument and place it in front of their chair (unopened) while the rest of the class set quietly. He would then dismiss row two to do the same while row one was then instructed to open their cases. When row three was dismissed to go get their instruments from their lockers, row one was instructed to assemble their instruments and row two was instructed to open their cases, and so on. It may seem a bit

controlling; however, this is how it begins. The reins can be loosened down the path, but it is important to set the course at the beginning of each and every year.

4. **Recruit and retain** for your program 24/7. Retention starts on the first day—the students are in your class and now it’s your job to keep them by providing experiences that they cannot get elsewhere. Music-making is exactly that! Build a culture where the students feel they belong and are appreciated. Empower your beginners to take an active role in the recruiting activities for the subsequent class of beginners that is to follow. They can put up posters with personal quotes explaining why new students should sign up for a music class. Quotes like “It’s fun to perform for my family and friends!” come from the heart and express the type of personal message that we would want them to share! Get to know your local school music dealer. They can be of great assistance with program-building.
5. **Invest in your beginners.** They are the seeds of the music education program. Have your first concert within the first 6-7 weeks of school to fire up the parents and allow the students to experience the thrill of performing for a live audience. The applause is infectious! The more they perform, the better they get. The easiest way to get started is to use the *First Performance Day of Celebration Concert* materials which can be downloaded for free from NammFoundation.org/fpndoc. A script and modifiable certificates and letters are provided!
6. **Keep your supervisors in the loop** by making them an invaluable part of your program. Invite your supervisor to help give out instruments to your “newbies.” They need to see the expressions on the faces of the students. Ask your principal to emcee your *First Performance Day of Celebration Concert*. Since it’s a scripted event, it’s easy to implement and lots of fun for your administrator! Be sure to offer to serve on any committees and keep your supervisor informed of all your performances and student achievements. (Solo & Ensemble ratings, etc.) Ask for their input if in doubt about any school procedures particularly if it has to do with finances—both in terms of collecting money (student generated funds) as well as understanding budget requests. Finally, new teachers often are faced with classroom management challenges. Reach out to your supervisor to learn about progressive discipline measures BEFORE you need to implement them. There are many times that an administrator needs to be consulted for one reason or another so know that this is normal. The best advice is “when in doubt, visit with your supervisor.”
7. **Engage the parents early** by making them a part of the learning process. Unless they have been involved in music-making themselves, very few parents know how to help their child realize success in their chosen ensemble. Ask your parents to take the 15-minute **New Music Parent Course** available via NFHS (the National Federation of State High School Associations). Share this link with your “newbie” parents at your first meeting: <https://bit.ly/NFHSNewMusicParent> You can also help them to discover the joy of music-making themselves by challenging your beginning students to teach their instrument to one of their parents. The parents will then perform several selections (exercises) from the method book in the Spring Concert. The parents love it and, of course, the students learn so much more about their instrument because they are having to teach what they know to someone else.

- 8. Become the centerpiece of activity in your school** by creating a culture of giving. Every community has needs and the rewards of collaborative giving allow students to experience the impact and benefit of servant leadership. Tap into the enthusiasm of the beginning students by having them participate in a music department food drive. Not only is this a worthy project that teaches empathy, but it also allows others to view the program as an organization that cares about others. Another idea is to ask students to write a note of appreciation to a favorite teacher during Teacher Appreciation Week. This is also a great way to teach young people how to express their feelings in writing. Another option would be to group students together according to the previous school they attended and have them prepare a musical video holiday card to send to their prior music teacher. (See Foothill High School example here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvxSTvL3D0I>) Just imagine how much this would be appreciated! Once this type of giving becomes a regular part of the program, you can encourage your students to provide their own ideas of projects to undertake.
- 9. Remember that mistakes = learning experiences.** You will make a lot of them, and you will feel terrible about each mistake you make. However, this also means that you will learn a very great deal as well. In my first year of teaching, I put a 25-foot-long burn mark in the sacred high school gym floor when a cord caught fire and burned from the outlet all the way to the sound board during an evening rehearsal. I just knew that the basketball coach was going to serve me up for breakfast the next morning! The only thing I could think to do was to call my immediate supervisor immediately to explain what had happened and to apologize profusely. The first thing on the next morning, that supervisor showed up to my classroom with the basketball coach in tow. My boss totally had my back! As disappointed as the coach was (and I could tell), he assured me—in front of my supervisor—that he knew that this egregious black smudge on “his” floor was certainly beyond my control and not to worry. The burn had only gone through the finish and not into the wood itself. Was that true? To this day, I don’t know! Did my supervisor run interference for me and prep the coach prior to his coming into school that next day? Count on it! The last thing I wanted to do is call my supervisor that previous evening to tell him the bad news but dealing with it right away was the best decision I could have made. Lesson learned? Listen to your gut! If something feels wrong, it probably is. If you make a mistake, apologize, forgive yourself, and do better the next time. So much of who we become is a result of what we learn along the way so remember that unless you do something wrong intentionally, you’re going to survive and become a better person as a result.
- 10. Be passionate about everything!** It will start a fire with those around you! Have you ever noticed that there are some people who lift you up when you are with them? No matter how you feel, you feel better when around them. You also feel safe and even cared for. That happens when we are genuinely **ENTHUSIASTIC** about what we do. Ultimately, this comes to pass once we make a cognitive decision concerning our vision and mission in life. Everything stems from that personal decision to always advance toward our established ideals. If your **VISION** (destination) is that you envision a community where all are actively engaged in life-long music-making activities, then your path is clear. Being engaged in life-long music-making activities can take the form of performing in community groups, church ensembles or even becoming an active audience member. If your **MISSION** (purpose) is to

enhance the overall quality of life for all children by inspiring in them the desire to experience the joy of music-making throughout life, then your vision will be realized! Keeping these BAGs (Big Audacious Goals) in mind will thus guide what you do and help you to remain focused on the big picture.

11. **SMILE!** Look at the people around you as they pass by in the hallway, on the sidewalk, or in the mall. So many are reading paperwork, looking at their phones, or just looking straight ahead with their minds obviously elsewhere. Adopt a “meet and greet” attitude and disposition. When walking through the school, smile at people and say “hello” or “good morning.” It makes others happy, and in return, it makes us happy too! The better we feel at school, the better we will perform as educators. When this happens, chances increase that people will view us as that person who always sports an upbeat attitude, always is willing to help, and always wanting to be their best. You’ll find that the students you serve will adopt this demeanor as well. There is just nothing better than smiling so just get started!

12. **Find a mentor/confidant to talk to and share with.** This final tip may be the most important of all. Each of us has spent years preparing to be a great music educator. We’ve put in hours upon hours in practice rooms, rehearsal halls, and a variety of classrooms and laboratories learning everything from how to be a better musician to composing string quartets. We hit student teaching with stars in our eyes as we finally got to put our “boots on the ground” while teaching under the guidance of a professional music educator that we hoped to emulate one day. **THEN IT HAPPENS!** We get our first job and suddenly, everything we learned goes right out the window! Reality slaps us in the face as we learn about processing an endless stream of paperwork, assessing the instrument inventory, planning effective fundraisers and, of course, establishing and maintaining effective classroom management while building a positive ensemble culture along the way. When did they teach us about all of this in college? Chances are, they didn’t! So, how do we learn to deal with all of the tasks that come along with being the music educator you want to be? **EASY! JUST ASK!!!! THE MOST IMPORTANT PARTNERSHIP FOR A YOUNG EDUCATOR TO ESTABLISH IS THAT OF A TRUSTED COLLEAGUE.** This could be a teacher or a coach at the school, a past teacher who served as a positive influence, or a retired music educator from the community. Another often overlooked partner is the local school music dealer. These professionals know the area and have a 10,000-foot view of the community as a whole—not just the music education community. There is someone out there for everyone, but it is the responsibility of the new(er) teacher to find that person and to cultivate that relationship. Is your ensemble not the best balanced? Ask your mentor for suggestions regarding music to play at festival. Are you having to teach a guitar class and you don’t play? There are resources out there that **WILL** help you. My biggest piece of advice to all young educators is to remember why you got into this business in the first place. Play in a local ensemble to keep up your chops and get to know others like you. Listen with an open mind and heart to music that inspires you. It will keep you grounded. Finally, know that every day is an opportunity to make music and we are so fortunate that our lives are fulfilled because of it. When you add the sharing of music with others to the mix, there’s just nothing better. So, work with someone who can help you surmount the concerns you have or the difficult times you may experience. These people are lifesavers who will help you to achieve life-balance and eventually realize a gratifying career in music education. . . the hardest job you’ll ever love!

About Marcia Neel

Marcia serves as president of Music Education Consultants, Inc., a consortium of music education professionals that 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. In 2016, Neel was 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.