

## ORCHESTRA: KEYS TO SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

By Jan Garverick

**A**cross my fifty years of public-school teaching, I made several personal discoveries that encouraged student success in orchestra. Mine was a journey of problem-solving, through trial and error, asking and listening to colleagues, attending workshops around the world, and studying research. The search for new approaches is never-ending. We must learn as we share our *art*—the *art of string teaching*.

**Develop an efficient pace for delivery of instruction.** How do you know what your pace is? Listen to yourself: record your rehearsals; analyze your language and sentence structure as you deliver information; examine pauses in delivery, score reading, and adhering to the daily prepared agenda. Critique the video, calculating how much time was used by verbal fillers (like *um* and *so*), score review, or searches for missing music. Practice removing filler words and *get to the action*. Observe the pacing of other directors' rehearsals and have colleagues observe and critique yours. You might find that you have been carelessly losing five to eight minutes. Any gap in pace invites discipline problems and student disengagement. Rehearsals must move at a steady pace. To maintain an effective pace, be prepared for each class (and always have a Plan B). Talk less; play more. While it may be cliché, it's still true that by failing to plan, we are planning to fail.

**Guide student practice.** The integration of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology into cell phones began in 1999, paving the way for countless advancements. Just as GPS helps you find your favorite lunch spot, an Orchestra GPS (Guided Practice Schedule) directs students on which specific measures to focus for playing tests and upcoming concerts or audition preparations. For example, to determine your GPS timeline, count back four weeks from an April concert date and distribute your GPS material at that time. The director examines three concert pieces for musical challenges. Design a GPS page with the date, name of each piece, metronome marking goal, practice passages with measure numbers, and the grading rubric. Choose several passages from each piece for each instrument. These are the only measures for testing. Start with longer passages, and then reduce measures required for the actual GPS test.

The GPS page also includes the test date, sectional dates, concert date/time/uniform. Give students a copy, post it on the website, email it to parents, and post it in the orchestra room. No one can claim they weren't informed. The GPS can be a fair evaluative process because it provides an upfront, specific guide for practicing

and empowers students to accept responsibility for their learning. I consistently experienced success with using the GPS tool in my orchestras. Technology gives us many options for digital tests today. I also encourage live GPS tests in front of the class period or during sectionals. The GPS Rubric could also cover posture, bowing, instrument position, bowing techniques, etc. (Occasionally, a student's test video was important to share during a parent conference.)

**Keep learning.** Continue to broaden and deepen your teaching resources to stay on the cutting edge of pedagogy, repertoire, string resources, and string research. Attending the TMEA and TODA conventions is essential. Don't simply attend. Propose a clinic and volunteer to help. Get involved in your state associations. Reach further to the national conventions and organizations as well. Summer string workshops offer great opportunities to meet other orchestra directors and composers, hear orchestra concerts, and exchange new ideas in all areas of string teaching. Read music journals and listen to podcasts. Keep asking, learning, and sharing. In 1987, Elizabeth A. H. Green remarked that "a teacher needs no longer to be poorly informed about what is feasible on violin, viola, cello, or bass." In 2025, we have innumerable resources, especially through technology. Be curious. Are you using the many resources we have at our fingertips?

**Provide outside opportunities for orchestra students.** Develop leadership through officer positions and peer tutoring. Work with elementary/middle school strings, and travel in state, out of state, and even internationally. Urge students to participate in the community. String quartets and string ensembles are perfect for weddings, receptions, social events, etc. Finding appropriate music will take teacher time, but it's time well-spent for student success in sharing talent and music with others. Music is meant to be shared, and most students are unaware of the many possibilities. It's important to consider that a student may decide to become a teacher because of these experiences in service to others and because they witnessed your passion as an orchestra director. The teacher must show the way—and the orchestra culture will flourish even beyond the rehearsal hall.



Jan Garverick retired in 2023, following a 50-year career as an orchestra director. She continues to teach elementary strings in Alamo Heights ISD in San Antonio.