

# Success Strategies for the First Years

by Andrea Harris-Rockwell, Daniel Gonzalez, and Jaylon Stewart

**T**hinking back on that first year we taught music, it's clear we didn't know the full extent of what we had gotten ourselves into. Even though we completed all the college courses designed to prepare us for the profession, it's impossible for every scenario to be covered. With that in mind, we want to offer a few strategies we've learned while on the job to help spark ideas in your first few years of teaching.

## Understanding the Climate and Culture

In English class, we are taught to know our audience before writing a speech, and the same goes for teaching! Although we can never be 100% prepared to step into a new role, we must do our best not to do it blindly. Do your

research, and don't be afraid to connect with alumni and previous employees and peruse social media pages about the district and program.

Knowing your district's demographics, climate, and culture will help you facilitate stronger relationships with faculty, parents, and students. Keep in mind that you aren't just taking a job as a music educator; you are becoming a very important person in the community! Yours is the face they see at competitions, parades, concerts, and other events.

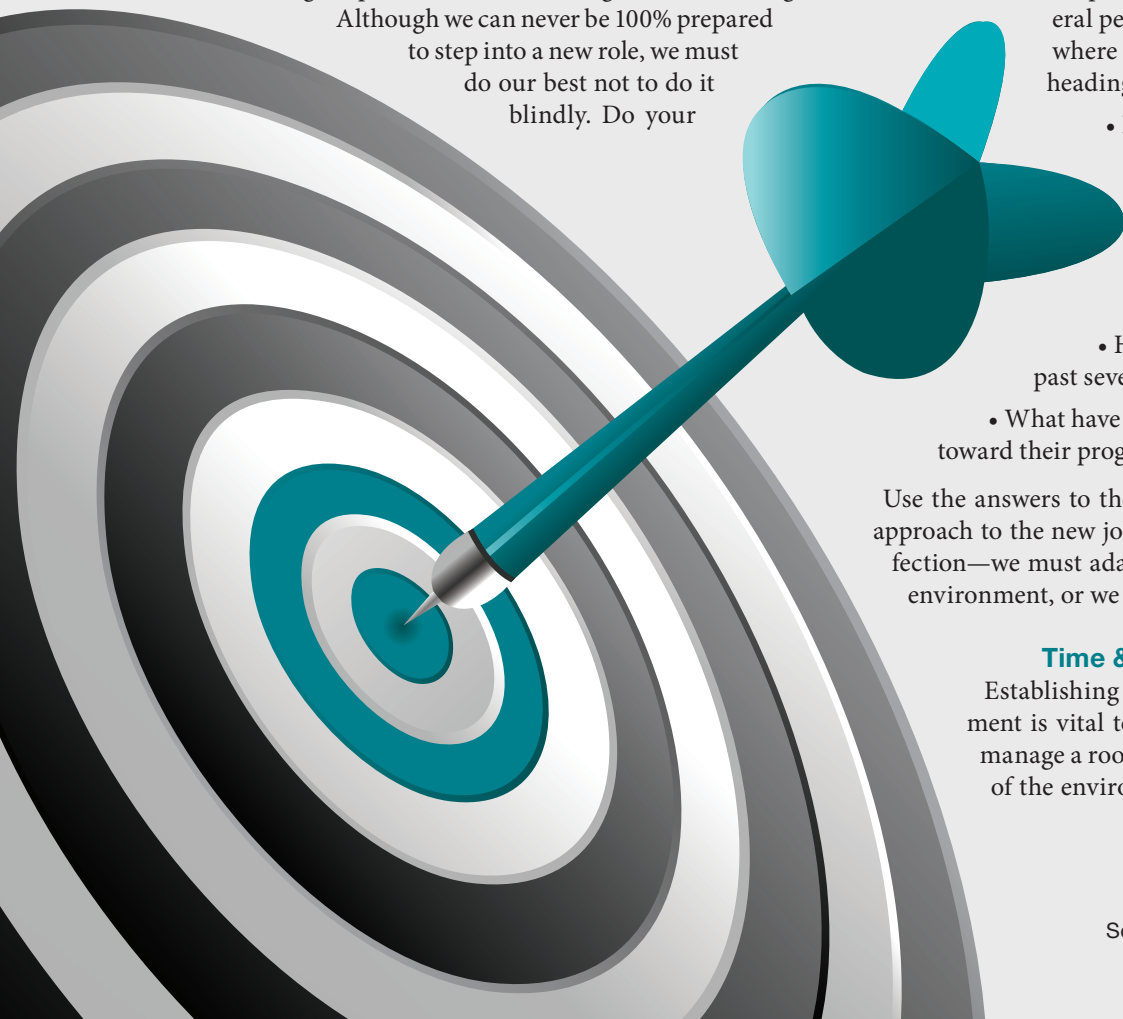
Think of *climate* as the current perception of the program and culture as the program's general personality. Each will help you understand where the program has been and where it is heading. Consider these questions:

- Is music education prioritized or is it viewed simply as a pastime?
  - What is the climate of the program in its current state?
  - Are students steadily pushing forward or are they losing steam?
- Has the program been successful the past several years, or is it in the rebuilding stage?
- What have the attitudes of the students been toward their program?

Use the answers to these simple questions to help shape your approach to the new job. Never go into a school expecting perfection—we must adapt our expectations to the reality of the environment, or we risk burning out students and ourselves.

## Time & Classroom Management

Establishing effective time and classroom management is vital to success in any classroom. You cannot manage a room full of students if you aren't in control of the environment. And if you are not in control of





You are not alone. You matter, and you must take care of yourself so that you can be a positive influence on your students for many years to come.

the environment, you will surely be unable to manage the time consumption in your classroom. A great place to start with time management is having policies and procedures in place. Train students on how to enter the classroom. Do you want your students walking in quietly? Do you want them to warm up on their own? If so, teach them how to do this.

If you haven't already established these procedures, wait no longer. Spend several days working on clear expectations and the three R's—relationships, routines, and resources—to build a better environment before diving into instruction. It will pay off in the long run.

### Your Rehearsal Game Plan

Always have a plan before the class begins. Winging a rehearsal will result in wasted time, so plan each rehearsal segment, and stick to your plan. Build lesson plans around expected problem areas so you can proactively avoid rehearsal issues. As you think about your rehearsals, imagine yourself as a student. How much time do you want to spend playing versus listening to the director talk? While it is important to provide feedback and ask higher-level thinking questions, we must find a productive balance, favoring playing over talking.

Before a class enters, prominently display their daily agenda in the classroom

(whiteboard, projector, monitor). When students know the game plan for the day, it will help you maximize instruction time. This simple step also helps demonstrate to students that you are prepared and organized, further reinforcing your expectations for your students also to be prepared and organized in the classroom.

Quick transitions result in fewer interruptions and help mitigate behavior issues. Consider doing a countdown from one activity to another, or have students freeze when one has been completed. With your well-thought-out rehearsal plan on display, the next activity will be known to you and your students, making the transition to it smoother.

At the end of each class, reflect on what went well and what needs to be changed; use that reflection to help build future plans.

### Building Relationships

**With the Community:** Involving students in the community will help build lasting impressions about your program. Examples can include participating in parades, performing at retirement or



# Create, perform, and explore.



Find your place in a remarkable community—perform in outstanding ensembles, audition for music scholarships regardless of your major, and study with an accomplished faculty.

Tacoma, WA | [music.admission@pugetsound.edu](mailto:music.admission@pugetsound.edu) | 253.879.3228

[pugetsound.edu/music](http://pugetsound.edu/music)

assisted living facilities, and helping with any outreach programs. The community might not remember when the band played the fight song after a touchdown or when the choir and orchestra went to contest. However, they will remember when they saw students performing at a nursing home or for a Veterans Day event or participating in a community project. In addition to community outreach in person, another way to increase visibility in your community is through social media platforms where you can post about your students' successes and activities on and off campus.

The bottom line is that the community needs to see the good things going on in your program because many community members know its history, and many grew up in the program.

**With Staff Members:** Within our schools, it is important to have great relationships with all faculty and staff, especially custodians, counselors, and secretaries. Custodians are tasked with many daily duties, so hold your students accountable for keeping the classroom clean. A great way to make the faculty and staff feel appreciated while promoting your program is to provide them an opportunity to purchase a program shirt or gift them a shirt. It is always great to see other team members wearing your program's shirt, and students love to see the support.

Find out the best way to communicate with school staff and share your program's event calendar with them to encourage their attendance.

**With Parents/Guardians:** Parents need to know as soon as possible what's going on in the program, so communicating early and effectively with them is vital. Using resources like Band App, Remind, or other district communication platforms will help keep parents in the know.

Spend time translating letters/forms into the languages of your students' families (if you need help, ask the parents/guardians for someone to offer this as a service to your program). Building relationships with the students' parents/guardians is essential; attend school parent events and open houses, and make quick, positive phone calls home about their children. Parents will become more invested in the program when you invest in them and their children.

**With Students:** Fostering positive student relationships and caring for students in and out of the classroom should be a top priority. Students are likely involved in other school programs, and when you attend their athletic events, other fine arts performances, and more, it will help in fostering that relationship. When time commitment is an issue, simply wishing students good luck in other events or asking them how it went can go a long way!

## Understand the Team's Vision and Goal

Taking the time to connect on a personal level with others will help you establish mutual respect among staff and will help you see past any preconceived notions you might have about them. Understand your team's vision and ensure yours aligns with it. A positive work environment is key to a successful program, and nurturing that environment is the responsibility of everyone on the team.

As you consider the many facets of your job—especially those that might not have been part of your teacher training—you might feel overwhelmed. Understand that you are not alone. You matter, and you must take care of yourself so that you can be a positive influence on your students for many years to come.



Andrea Harris-Rockwell is the Van JH Assistant Band Director (Van ISD).



Daniel Gonzalez is the Tyler HS Assistant Band Director (Tyler ISD).



Jaylon Stewart is the Chapel Hill JH Head Band Director (Chapel Hill ISD).

orders@rhythmbee.com  
903-725-3304



Apps for teacher  
and all students

*Get a great start to the  
school year.*

**Music Education Software**  
*Band, Choir, Orchestra, Elementary Music*

Rhythm / Solfeggio / Curwen / Math Facts  
1 & 2 & / 1 te 2 te / Ta Ta Ti Ti

*Windows, Mac, Android*

## Learn More

You can gain even more advice about classroom management and work-life balance for teachers in their first years in the August issue's installment of Q&A for Music Teachers (page 29 in that issue).

For an online version, go to:  
[www.tmea.org/august2022](http://www.tmea.org/august2022).

Q&A for Music Teachers is a great resource, especially for early-career teachers. You can search online by topic or division at [www.tmea.org/q&a](http://www.tmea.org/q&a).

*There are over 200 questions  
and thousands of answers!*