

# MMEA: Top Ten Things I Wish I Had Known Before My First Teaching Job

by Clark Sheldon

*Many music teachers go into the profession to share their love of music, but before they can get to the music, there are so many things to get past. The impetus behind the session I gave at the MMEA Midwinter Clinic this year came from the struggles and tough lessons I learned as a beginning teacher, and from talking to my colleagues and classmates about their struggles as well. After seeing the distress and challenges that many young teachers face when confronted with their first teaching situations, I decided to put together some thoughts to share with newer teachers and those going into the field. If a new teacher can know what to expect, and how to change the reality so it is closer to their expectations, a great deal of distress can be avoided. Hopefully, these tips and ideas will point you in the right direction and will spur conversations. You may identify with some of these reflections; I hope that if you don't understand or disagree with some others that you will talk with a veteran teacher in your school about to see if they have anything to add. My biggest hope for this list is not that they all are necessarily taken to heart, but that they might encourage dialogue among teachers about how survive in the profession, and to make our classrooms as successful as possible.*

## Knowing what to expect:

- *Your students are not in music for the same reason you are in music.* Students don't sign up for a music class to be inspired or to be part of something profound. Most often they sign up for a class because they think it will be fun, because their friends are in it, or their parents make them.
- *Good intentions don't count in the classroom.* Know and have in mind how you want to be treated so you don't get hurt. Your students will take advantage of you as much as you will

let them.

- *Be prepared to be the only advocate for yourself.* The school setting is a competitive environment. No-one is there to look out for you. You'll need to look out for yourself. Many fellow teachers and administrators will also take advantage of you as much as you let them. Build connections with your faculty and staff.

- *Know the situation you are getting into.* What is the community like? What was the teacher like that you are following? What is the school schedule? How often will you see your students and for what amount of time? Be willing to alter your teaching style to better serve your clientele.

- *Beware the power of mediocrity and laziness.* You will encounter teachers who do not raise the level of performance in their classrooms. This usually happens either because they don't have high expectations (mediocrity), or because they don't want to expend the effort to get their class where they want it (laziness). Look out if you try to change their reality.

## Bringing reality in line with your expectations:

- *Nearly every success you have stems from control in the classroom.* Classroom management is more of a teaching issue than a behavioral issue. "If you want to keep students' attention, you have to put something in it." My students aren't in music to listen to me talk. Not all kids learn the way I do. If students are going to learn something new, they need to know *why*.

- *You are the catalyst.* The performance of a group is the direct result of the teacher. Don't expect anything from your group that you don't teach them. In many situations, you are the only music experience they have. The best teachers are ones who can raise student performance in the classroom.

- *Know how to teach the instru-*

*ment(s)!* If you want your groups to improve, you have to teach them their instrument both in rehearsals and in lessons, if you have them. You have to tell students *everything!*

- *Telling students something is not teaching.* They need to hear things over and over and over. "Good technique is not a vaccination, it is a process." —Sally O'Reilly. Performance is their indication of content learned.

- *The literature you select is one of the single most important contributors to the success of your performance.* Don't over program. Over programming is one of the easiest things to do, and it is one of the surest ways to see that students do not succeed. Do all the members of the group have the necessary skills? Do all members have knowledge of what will be asked of them? Tailor the selections to the group, not the group to the music. Know the student literature. Do not rely solely on the music you have performed.

- *Be willing to be unpopular.* Many teachers who try to be a student's friend as a teacher end up being neither. Teaching is the job you were hired to do. If you care about your students, you will make sure they learn. "We have an obligation to have certain inflexible, non-negotiable standards for our students, our profession, and ourselves." —Sally O'Reilly

- *Network!* Get connected professionally. This is vital to your survival and growth. No-one knows everything, ever. Especially not right out of college. There are other teachers out there who have similar experiences and are willing to help and share and listen. Observe as many teachers as possible, especially successful ones.

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