



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Developing Better Musicians Through Mentorship Programs

by Michael Watson

While there are several different types of mentorship programs from peer coaching to older students working with younger students, this article focuses on high school mentors working with first and second year students.

There are several reasons to develop a mentor program in your school district. First, it can be a way to challenge more advanced high school students. As I mentioned in my previous article, *Meeting the needs of advanced students in the school orchestra program* (Spring 2002), these students' experiences can be used to help other students. Second, mentor guided lessons provide more instruction time for younger students than they receive at school. In most programs, the youngest students meet infrequently with their orchestra teacher. The mentor can provide additional guidance outside of class. Third, teaching helps the mentor learn more about their own playing. This quote from Joseph Jobert states it succinctly, "to teach is to learn twice." Finally, mentorship programs can lead some students toward choosing teaching as a career. That is especially important as there is a shortage of private teachers locally and a shortage of string teachers for school programs nationwide.

My interest in teaching music began with a mentorship program at my high school in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. I was selected to be the orchestra teaching assistant at the district's middle school for one semester. I registered for the mentorship program as a class. Everyday during fourth period I would drive to the middle school to assist the teacher there. My final project for the class was to teach the students to play a piece for their May concert. I also had several chances to work with students in small groups and individually while the teacher

rehearsed the orchestra. Several students became mentors in this program after I finished it, and many of them have decided to become string teachers. The benefits for the mentor and the middle school students are probably obvious. Yet let me state that all of us learned more about playing our instruments and became better musicians in the process.

In Minnesota, the Mounds View Summer Orchestra program is another example of a mentorship program. During the summer, they hire several experienced teachers to teach small classes of five to ten students. Additionally, they hire high school students to work as teaching assistants. These teaching assistants observe the teachers and reinforce the concepts learned in class. As the teaching assistants gain experience, they have opportunities to teach the students. This can range from working with students to get them caught up with the class, to reviewing lessons with the class while the main teacher works with students individually. I can think of a few teachers who began as teaching assistants in the Mounds View summer program and decided to choose music teaching as a career. Even if they don't choose to become teachers, many of them choose to privately tutor younger students during the school year.

The types of programs described above are excellent examples, but not very common or plausible in most school districts. Next I would like to describe the more typical mentor programs. The first type of program is when the high school students come to work with small groups of younger students either during the school day or after school. Usually the mentors have the younger students play through their orchestra pieces and coach them to play it better. The second type is publishing

a list of advanced high school students who are willing to teach private lessons for a small fee. I have had mixed feelings about these programs because there is usually very little training and instruction for the high school mentors. I believe that the high school mentors and younger student mentees can benefit if the high school students received more instruction and guidance.

This summer, I wrote a curriculum and developed a website (home.earthlink.net/~mwatson2/pedagogy) for teaching high school students the basics of teaching younger students. In it, I go through how to teach the basics of hand position, posture and bowing that most beginning students learn in their first few months. I show examples of how to teach these concepts including a few games that are based on Rolland's *The Teaching of Action in String Playing*. I plan to teach high school students the curriculum this year before they begin mentoring younger students. Additionally, I plan to add additional information later about teaching more advanced concepts such as basic spiccato and shifting. Please let me know what you think about the website and if you have any suggestions of things to add. Overall, I hope that mentorships programs will begin to become more ingrained into the curriculum of all high school orchestras, because they will help develop better musicians of all the students they impact.

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