

# All-State: How to Get Middle School Students Excited About Being in Orchestra

presented by Jennifer Arco — reported by Janet Anderson

## Owatonna Orchestra Program Overview

Students start in third grade. Fourth through sixth grade student have one 20-minute lesson during the day and for 48 minutes and lessons during the week. 27% of the classes are involved in orchestra. It is a stable population with students living there most of their lives. Orchestra students have an average GPA of 3.4 or better. Owatonna schools have a booster program, community orchestra and Wenger Corporation in town.

## 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Orchestra

Jen shared her success tip of having students brainstorm any word that starts with “d” for an example. She improvises on each word, tying it in story form to a life experience of hers. The goal is to let the students get to know her.

First impressions are very important, according to Jen, especially for teachers who loop. Expectations need to be up front—what are all the unwritten rules: how do the students come in the room, get their stuff, sit down, and what do they do if they need to go to the bathroom, get a drink, need rosin, need tuning, etc. Jen has students keep her in the loop by letting her know what they are doing and where they are going because she is responsible for them.

Don't be afraid to let students be a little afraid of your expectation, says Jen. They are “big” kids and should now have more expected of them. Follow through is a key ingredient to making your classroom less stressful; follow through with expectations and do them in the same order each time.

In the first rehearsal, Jen advises getting a feel for the group. What do they like?

What are students interested in? Are they serious or more goofy, etc?

A rule Jen lives by is not to compare orchestras, especially younger to older. She recommends starting with basic repertoire and gradually give them get more challenging music. Build ensemble skills slowly. Let them know that mistakes are OK.

## 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Year

September–October: Build rapport and help students get acclimated to junior high where they have gone from one teacher to eight. Remember they are nervous about their lessons.

October–December: This is where Jen works on the fall concert. They do quartets, etc. in front of the class, choose costumes, etc. and really make it a production.

January–June: Jen builds skills and prepares for a more advanced string concert.

## 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Orchestra

Jen asserts that the orchestra already knows her and pushes the kids really hard. Expectations are high, tougher music, more sight-reading and higher expectations of watching the baton, doing cut offs, bow placement, vibrato, etc.

Jen adds daily techniques to her scales, such as varying the speed, scales in shifted positions, and different articulations. Right away, Jen points out how important it is to ask students what is happening in other sections. Jen said that students need to be moved out of their “self-centered” ways.

Eighth graders are expected to be leaders. Students set two goals per quarter and Jen finds that when students take control of their education, they meet their goals with

more of themselves invested.

## 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Year

September–December: they are pushed to their limits. For the first concert, Jen has them pick one piece to refine for competition.

January–March: they participate in the competition.

March–April: Jen prepares the students for recruiting presentations, which are given in April. In May she has her final spring concert.

## Repertoire Selection

Jen asserts that selection of the right literature is important to the flow of rehearsals and the morale of the group. A piece of literature may be quality, however, it may be wrong for your group.

## The Truth about Middle School Students

Jen says that if you can be a little “weirder” than they are, they will follow you. She tells stories about herself and lets herself be known to her students.

## Find Ways to Bond

Jen goes to sports events and other ways to connect with kids.

Jen said that music is not her whole life; she claims she is a teacher first, and a musician second. Teaching is her love and orchestra is her medium. This may be the key to her success!

*Jen Arco teaches in the Owatonna Schools and has received many awards for excellence. Janet Anderson teaches in St. Cloud. †*