



ORCHESTRA

Starting them Young: Giving Students the Opportunity to Teach

by Christopher Jannings

Taking an extended leave of absence from a teaching position you have put your heart and soul into for the past 12 years gives you a great deal of perspective. There are things that I miss every single day (most notably the students and the music making). Not shockingly, there are also a few things that I do not miss (mostly the “administrative” tasks required of us). Though it is early in my journey towards a PhD, I feel as though I’m taking important steps in the research I’m undertaking. One of my ultimate goals is to be a voice that can help lead to a greater presence of strings in our schools. By synthesizing some of my research related to the national string teacher shortage, this article will discuss a specific strategy that teachers in the field can use to encourage talented students to consider a career in music education.

One of the most effective ways to get students interested in teaching is to give them hands-on teaching experiences. Research by Hamann, Frost, and Draves (2011), Miksza and Austin (2010), and Rickels et. al. (2013) has shown that the pre-college opportunity to conduct an ensemble, lead sectionals, and/or tutor students is a major factor in music majors’ decision to pursue music education. Experience with conducting, in particular, has been shown to be a great motivating factor for pre-service string education majors. I speculate that this is likely due to the exciting, performance related nature of conducting and the powerful feeling one gets from leading an ensemble. Part of the reason people love to perform as musicians is the special, almost indescribable feeling it can give us. I think most of us would agree that we can experience that same sort of nirvana while on the podium. The fact that we get the rewarding experience of both teaching and being performing artists makes music educators very lucky people.

While at first blush this may seem like an article that is only applicable to high school educators, I argue that providing teaching and mentoring experiences can

(and should) happen from an earlier age. There’s no doubt that high school students have the maturity and capacity to implement more of these experiences, but that doesn’t mean that middle school students and even older elementary students can’t get their feet wet when it comes to taking leadership rolls and sharing their knowledge with others. Aside from the fact that these experiences have been shown to increase interest in music education as a career, this helps develop the leadership qualities and confidence in students that makes your ensemble great. If for nothing else, consider implementing these suggestions simply to make your program stronger.

Experiences to consider:

1) *Conducting*

- Give students in your ensemble the opportunity to be a conductor for a short amount of time. For much of my time in Roseville, my younger orchestra (mostly 9th graders) had “Student Conductor Friday” during the last 10-15 minutes of rehearsals on Friday. At certain points in the year, all students would practice basic ($\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, and $\frac{4}{4}$) patterns together as a class. Not only is this a fun experience for the student conductor, it forces the ensemble to listen and watch more effectively to stay together.
- Run a “conducting lab” before or after school. Get volunteers together to form a small string orchestra, select repertoire to read that is very manageable, and give interested student conductors some time on the podium.
- At the high school level, consider taking on independent study students in conducting.

2) *Leading Sectionals*

- Consider doing pull out sectionals from your ensemble and having a designated student leader. Advanced high school students can likely achieve this without any additional supervi-

sion. Younger students may need varying degrees of supervision from yourself, another music instructor, or volunteers who may be at your disposal. Regardless of the level of supervision and guidance from adults, the ultimate goal is to engage students in critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork.

- Within your district, set up occasional sectionals where high school students lead middle school students, middle school students lead elementary students, etc. Logistically this can be challenging, but with a little brainstorming most schools can figure out some sort of system.

3) *Tutoring/Mentoring*

- If your district has a summer orchestra camp or summer beginner program, look for older students in your district to volunteer as coaches and mentors. Students learn at a different pace, students go on vacation and fall behind... there are a number of positives having student mentors work with the students.
- Have a top-notch player who is looking to immerse themselves in more music and try out some teaching? Have younger students who should be taking private lessons but face a financial hardship? Consider having your high flying students (especially those with an interest in teaching) volunteer or charge a nominal fee for lessons.

References

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