

## All-State: Differentiation in the Orchestra Classroom: Promoting Individual Growth and Accountability

presented by Mark Gitch — reported by Sarah Duffy and Paul Boese

The session *Promoting Individual Growth and Accountability: Differentiation in the High School Orchestra* was set in a situation where there were no pull-out lessons. How do you teach and grade for the various levels of playing that are in any ensemble? The overall grading was based on 65% playing performance, 25% engagement in class, and 10% concert attendance.

Even though the topic was differentiation, there were the same quality criteria for all. In tune is in tune. On time is on time. “Setting a high pre-professional bar for the meaning of excellence is both inherently critical and consistent with other academic fields.” At the same time, you need to teach students that perfection is “fleeting at best.” 100% of the grade is based on the criteria.

Mark has a fairly complex rubric for scales, separated by instrument with Foundation, Proficiency, Advanced across the top. Variables can include speed/fluency (prefers to use the word fluency) and the number of keys assessed. Mark sometimes offers extra credit for attempting a more difficult scale, as long as their level is at least a B+. He calls these points “Risk Points” as opposed to “extra credit,” and it’s a way to reward students for taking a risk. This is motivating for the really ambitious students. All of the test dates are included. There is a formative assessment about one month before the summative assessment. If a student says “I did this in middle school,” you can respond, “You did this in middle school through one lens. Now we are using a different lens. All

I did was change the lens.” You can establish the expectation that if you want to play in the top ensemble, you need to do XYZ. Scales must be memorized unless there is a specific learning need. Mark’s goal is to assess once per quarter.

The key to accountability and student success is letting each student self-select their starting point on a particular grid. This allows the student and teacher to chart a path and set a goal. A grade of 100% is based on reaching the goal.

Review what “in tune” means before teaching scales. There is a higher expectation for student independence at the high school level. Mark starts out as less fun in the fall, and more fun as the year goes on. He sets the expectation right away in the fall that students are responsible for solving problems and doing some hard work. The reward is the student finally understanding intonation and fixing it on his own. The students will sometimes sit and wait quietly while other sections work.

One-octave scale work emphasizes the ti-do half-step. Practice descending scales: 8 7 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 T7 1 (T7 is turnaround 7). Mark’s other one-octave scale routine focuses on the tetrachords. In  $\frac{3}{4}$  play: | 1 2 3 | 4— | | 5 6 7 | 8— | 8 7 6 | 5 4 3 | 2 1 T7 | 1— |

Mark sets the expectations so high that the students can run class by themselves if he is gone.

Scale Assessment: There is no discussion of assessment until the students are ready for the quiz. It keeps the tone a little

more relaxed during the learning stage. The students are suddenly more focused when assessment is on the table. His assessments have to be done in class.

Rules: All tests must be completed using a tonic reference and a metronome. Reference tones can be found in the class Moodle site, The Tuning CD (iTunes \$0.99 per pitch), or apps: insTuner (free) or Tonal Energy (\$6.99).

Assessments are recorded, live in class, by section, one at a time with Mark. Allow for students to play privately if they have anxiety. By the end of the year, students are always playing in front of class. “Your job is to support one another.”

The rubric shows students that there is a path to success, and steps that must be achieved. It can really focus students on what they need to do in order to reach their goals. All students can receive an A based on their individual work. They won’t all do the exact same thing, but they can all meet their own goals.

*Mark Gitch is Director of Orchestras at Wayzata High School. He received the 2004 MNSOTA Master Teacher: School Orchestra award.*

*Sarah Duffy recently joined the faculty in the Mounds View School District, after many years in Edina and Robbinsdale Public Schools. Violist Paul Boese teaches in the Grand Forks ND Public Schools. †*