

Where Do I Start?

George Little, 2021-22 TBA Vice President



I have spent quite a bit of time with young band directors and student teachers over the last 10-15 years. Let's face it, being a young teacher is hard in many different ways. I often find myself telling stories of my own early years of teaching to reassure others that if I can survive, they can too. I usually start with, "The only thing I did well my first year of teaching was straighten chairs and stands. I felt like I wasn't good at anything else. So, I would straighten chairs and stands in the band hall about three or four times a day so that I could feel good about something." That's the God's honest truth.

I have found that providing an easy-to-refer-to checklist of priorities and verbiage is a great way to help young teachers feel organized while giving them options to measure improvement in a quantifiable way.

DISCLAIMER: There are MANY different ways to address the issues that we deal with in a band classroom. Available options for instructional materials, useful technology, and pedagogical approaches seem somewhat limitless. However, a teacher's delivery, consistency, and expectations will always be the most important aspects of a successful band class.

Priorities

Knowing what to address first is half the battle. Rather than getting lost in the limitless details of running a band classroom, keep the most important things at the forefront of your teaching.

Important thing #1 - How do my students act?

- Good classroom management is so very important, and having a good lesson plan is crucial to good classroom management. Planning out your class so students are engaged and "doing" as much as possible is far better than winging it and talking too much from the front of the room.

- If you don't have control of your class, there won't be much learning going on. If this is an area where you struggle, seek out help from a mentor as soon as possible.

Important thing #2 - How do my students look?

How is their posture, hand position, instrument angle, organization of their space (chair placement in relation to stand placement), embouchure formation, and grip for percussion? If students don't look right, will they ever truly sound as good as possible?

Important thing #3 - How do my students sound?

- The number one most important thing for a musician is their tone. A band's tone is their ensemble sound.

- Some may be wondering why I listed this most "important thing" as third on the list of priorities. Simply put, out of control classrooms with students that don't look like they are supposed to look will *not* yield a large percentage of good tones.

Important thing #4 - Are we moving toward musical self-sufficiency?

If your students act right, look right, and sound great, try to teach them how to self-diagnose and correct

their own playing issues. A good start for enabling self-sufficiency comes from challenging students to focus on the following: *Am I playing the right notes (fingerings and pitch accuracy), at the right time (correct rhythms at a steady tempo), with the correct articulations?* There are obviously many other things that go into being a fully self-sufficient musician, but my overwhelming personal experience has been that when first introducing a piece of music to students (regardless of their level of proficiency), we largely talk about "how it goes".....notes, rhythms, and articulations.

Verbiage

Having a standardized, well thought out, and consistently used way to say things in your band classroom and vertically aligned program will make teaching much more simple. Here is some of my favorite verbiage in a question/answer format. Asking the same questions regularly, with students always giving the same responses, provides a stable foundation of knowledge to which you can quickly return in order to provide easily understandable steps for improvement.

What is the most important thing?

- Answer – TONE!
- If you don't sound good, nothing else matters.

What is the most important thing for an ensemble?

- Answer – ensemble sound (balance)
- Ensemble sound is the tone of the band.

What are the three parts of a note?

- Answer – start, duration, and release
- Identifying three parts of a note is very useful when trying to challenge students to listen for unified note starts, note shapes, and releases.

How do we make a steady sound?

- Answer – steady air and steady embouchure
- Use this statement to give a quick reference to what will actually fix note shape and response issues. Either the air is not moving correctly or the embouchure is not set and steady.

How do we move together?

- Answer – watch, count, and listen
- Students often times simply need to watch better, count more carefully, or listen better in order to contribute to better group pulse and rhythmic accuracy.

What can sound like a wrong note?

- Answer – a wrong note, playing out of tune, and the right note at the wrong time
- This serves as a good reminder for students and teachers. We shouldn't always accuse students of missing a fingering, when sometimes they are playing out of tune or moving out of sync.

How do we play in tune?

- Answer – play without contrasting sound waves
- The argument can be made that this doesn't apply to dissonance, but even dissonant intervals are supposed to be in tune.

What is the order of importance for proper balance?

- Answer: 1 – Melody
2 – Counter Melody
3 – Moving Bass Line
4 – Rhythmically Interesting Lines
5 – Chords
- Make sure your students know their role in the ensemble sound and that their role dictates their volume compared to others.

Minimize tongue to maximize tone.

- This isn't a question, but it is something my students hear often.
- Overly heavy articulation distracts from a beautiful sound.

Being a great band director is a multi-layered, lifelong pursuit, and it is easy to get discouraged. Hopefully these tools will help you fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

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