



A Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Beginners: The Tall and the Short of It

CLINICIANS:

Chris Brown, George Little

Texas Bandmasters Association 2015 Convention/Clinic

JULY 23-26, 2015

**HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

A Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Beginners: The Tall and the Short of It

Chris Brown – Kimbrough MS, Mesquite ISD – cbrown@mesquiteisd.org

George Little – New Diana HS, New Diana ISD – glittle@ndisd.org

Beginner Program Descriptions

Kimbrough MS

Kimbrough Middle School is a class CCC middle school in Mesquite ISD and is the only feeder program for Poteet High School. Kimbrough has one full time director and three of the four Poteet HS band directors teach beginner classes. This allows us to divide the beginners into eight homogeneous classes. The only combined classes are low brass and saxophone/double reed. Students at Kimbrough do not start band until their 7th grade year.

New Diana MS

New Diana Middle School is a class C middle school in New Diana ISD. There is one band hall and two directors for grades 6-12. We have five beginning band classes split into flute, clarinet/sax, trumpet/horn, low brass, and percussion. Students at New Diana start band in the 6th grade.

Recruiting

Recruiting is an essential component of a successful band program. While this clinic's primary focus is not on recruiting, it is necessary to consider a few reminders. A good recruiting season is the first step in having a successful beginner band year.

- The recruiting process should ensure that students are placed on an instrument that they are physically and academically suited for.
- Individual instrument assignments should provide balanced instrumentation.
- Keep in mind that the recruiting season is the first impression for future band students and parents. Be diligent in conveying a positive, organized, and enthusiastic band culture.

Classroom Management

Beginner band students will have a much lower ceiling of achievement without good classroom management. When students do not pay attention, they do not learn.

- Good classroom management starts and ends with teacher expectation.
- Learning to play an instrument is a discipline. Students must learn to be self-disciplined.

- Try to handle discipline problems without sending a student to the office.
- Contacting parents for help is one of the most effective ways to handle unruly students.
- Invite an experienced band director that you trust to watch you teach a beginner band class. Ask them for honest feedback and points of improvement. We must all be willing to accept constructive criticism on the journey to having good classroom management.

Starting the School Year

The first few weeks of beginning band do not move at a fast pace. Don't feel the urge to move faster than you should at the expense of establishing correct fundamentals and procedures.

If possible, designate one director to deal with administrative tasks such as move-in students who are not assigned to an instrument and students who aren't able to purchase their assigned instrument. All other available directors should start teaching basic music theory, a counting system, and posture.

****IMPORTANT NOTE**** All directors in a one high school district (or in a cluster within a multi high school district) should strive to be vertically aligned so that all students hear the same vocabulary and use the same counting system from day one.

The First Sounds (Without the Fully Assembled Instrument)

When discussing the "right" way to learn to play an instrument from scratch, you will come across many different opinions. There is more than one way to get to the "right" result. However, your approach should be such that a student will learn to look and sound fundamentally correct.

- Students start learning to play mouthpiece/head joint as soon as there are enough instruments in the students' hands at both Kimbrough and New Diana.
- Assuming that proper posture has already been taught, the next step should be learning to breathe correctly.
 - Breathing should be done purposefully.
 - Breathing should be done in a natural way and without tension.
- Embouchure formation - refer to colleagues, college notebooks, and clinic handouts to ensure correct embouchure formation.
- Students should learn to blow through the mouthpiece by itself before introducing the fully assembled instrument.
- At this point in the beginner year, teachers should start to individualize instruction based on student needs.

Playing Position

Proper playing position is not learned in one day. Remember that if they look “right”, eventually they can sound “right”.

- Holding the instrument should not change proper body posture.
- Learning to place hands and fingers correctly should be done prior to lifting the instrument to the face.
- The instrument goes to the embouchure. Students SHOULD NOT move their head to the instrument.
- Arms should not contact the student’s side.
- Check to ensure that there is no tension in the shoulders when lifting instruments to the face.
- Consistently check for correct instrument angle on the face.

The First Sounds (With the Fully Assembled Instrument)

When starting to make sounds on the fully assembled instrument, it is common for students to have lapses in posture, hand position, embouchure formation, and correct breathing. You will need to give students consistent daily reminders that will help them to remember and apply the fundamentals they learned prior to playing on a fully assembled instrument.

If you look “right”, eventually you can sound “right”.

What’s Next?

The scope and sequence of each beginner band class depends largely on the instrument that is being learned, the personality of a class, and the experience of a teacher. Here are few tips for how to proceed after learning the basics of how to behave, posture, breathing, and producing a sound.

- Articulation should be introduced as soon as the students can consistently produce a steady sound. Failing to address articulation early on can produce many players who don’t use their tongues at all.
 - Students should learn where the tongue should touch.
 - The air should not stop when articulating.
- Tone should be the number one priority for every instrument.
- Don’t worry as much about how far you can get in the book as much as you should worry about how your students look and sound.
- The beginner book should not dictate the order of instruction for concepts.
- Please don’t try to “keep up with the Joneses”. Do not base the view of your success or failure on the fact that your class is not as far along as a 25 year veteran. Make sure your kids look right and sound right!

Other Considerations

Picking the right literature and providing positive performance experiences for an ensemble is very important. Beginner band is no different.

- Pick concert literature that is in line with where your students are developmentally.
 - Sequential learning should not stop in order to “push” your students beyond what they can do in order to perform a “hard” song at the Christmas or Spring Concert/Festival.
- Consider participating in a beginner solo & ensemble festival at the end of the school year. Benefits include:
 - Learning to perform as an individual.
 - Students get a second opinion on their playing from a judge.
 - With the right judge, results can be an encouragement for students to stay in band.

There are many things that a teacher needs to understand in order to be truly successful at teaching a beginner band student and class. It is OK if you don't know everything. No one knows everything! We should never be too old, too experienced, or too “successful” to ask for other teachers' opinions and help.