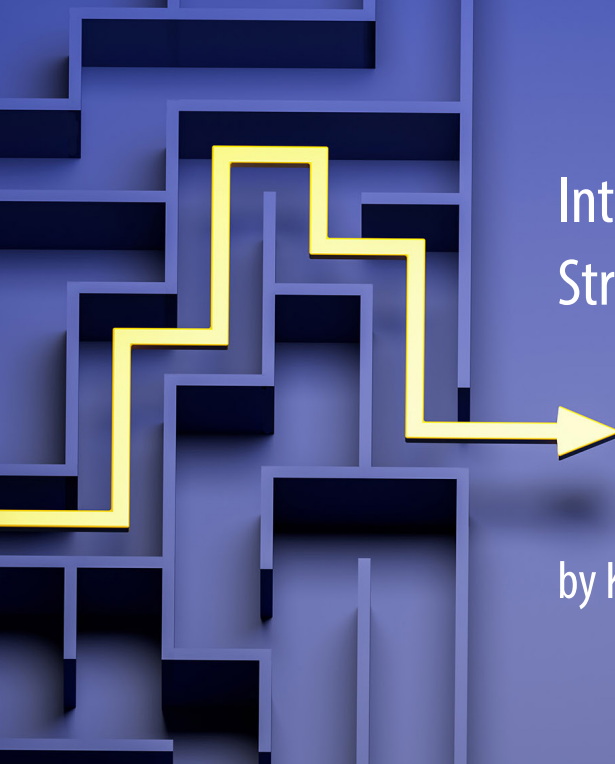




Into the Great Unknown: Strategies and Tips for Early-Career Teachers

by Kendra Taylor and Olivia Salzman-Coon

Prepping for a new school year can be a great way to be ready to hit the ground running when in-service week begins. For early-career teachers there are challenges that can arise while trying to get a head start on the school year. After presenting to early-career teachers at the 2024 Northwestern ACDA Region Conference, we recognized the need for a written resource as an extension of that session. The aim of this column is to offer practical guides to help make your summer prep work effective and organized. You will find a checklist for planning and organizing your program, ideas for classroom management and team-building activities, and strategies that help to address common challenges. Three main challenges are summarized first, followed by three strategies.

Challenge 1: Help! I'm overwhelmed as I think about how to organize my space, materials, and calendar for the upcoming year.

Strategy one will help you start organizing your plan for the school year, including prepping your materials, space, and schedule so you can have a cohesive school year. Our suggested summertime tasks will also be broken into a checklist to guide your work.

Challenge 2: I want to prioritize getting to know my students and building trust in my classroom.

Building rapport and having a clear plan for classroom management are great ways to gain trust from

your students and create a safe and predictable environment. But how do we accomplish this and how do we plan for students we haven't met yet? Strategy two will outline classroom management tips to incorporate early in the school year to build trust.

Challenge 3: How can I start planning for my first days of school?

Strategy three will give practical tips on selecting activities for your first days of the school year, including tips for getting settled in a new space, choosing goals and activities for your first days of school, and tips for fostering community in your students.

Strategy One: Planning at a Glance

Time to start planning! Use the checklist below as you begin creating materials for your school year. Much of this material can be made ahead of time and refined as you learn more about your program. You are encouraged to use this list as a guide, then modify it to fit your own needs. Also, don't be afraid to reach out to your colleagues for more ideas.

Back-to-School Checklist

- Syllabi (include field trip rules, choir uniform, music checkout policy, grading, calendar, etc.)

- Get to know you/intake form (name, preferred name for printing on the concert program, voice part, instruments played, music background, superpower)
 - Ensemble handbooks (could include singing technique, music theory, sight-reading, warmups, tips on how to practice, vocal health tips)
 - Reserve space for rehearsals, concerts (risers, AV, equipment that will need to be brought in for the event)
 - Reserve busses (if you know about field trips)
 - Familiarize self with budget, plan as you can (i.e., 25% of the budget will be for our accompanist, 15% for sheet music, etc.)
 - Fundraising plans for the year (timing of fundraisers, where they might happen and with whom, possible vendors)
 - Uniforms (cleaning, selection, purchases, guidelines if students provide the uniform and backup items obtained from secondhand stores)
 - Visual materials for walls (learning targets, I.P.A., vocal technique—*keep in mind this is an opportunity to be culturally responsive*)
 - Book guest musicians (accompanist, clinicians, voice coaches, choirs)
 - Music library (clean, update, pull potential repertoire for consideration—also consider what repertoire in your possibly very old music library should be reconsidered and removed)
 - Repertoire selection (create plans A, B, and C, and try to be flexible until your ensembles have settled for the year)
 - Find out if you are expected to perform right away (assemblies, sporting events). If yes, begin planning rehearsals to learn music traditions of your school (Star Spangled Banner, Fight Song, Alma Mater, etc.)
 - Plan a day to print all your materials for students (you likely will not have time the first day of school)
 - If using practice tracks, begin creating these for music you know you will perform
 - Consider possible sick days/absences: you can create a video of your warmups that can be used by students at home and by a sub when you are gone.
 - Plan your classroom layout (seating, risers, extra music, hall pass) with classroom management and efficiency in mind
 - Acquire materials from others (music teachers in the district, former teacher at your position)
 - Check rosters, confirm ensemble placement with counselors
 - Begin memorizing names/faces of students
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- If you are new to a school, you might consider asking the previous music teacher for their teaching materials (syllabi, trip policies, academic lettering system, concert programs, extracurricular rehearsals/events, any materials related to hosting festivals, and music traditions at the school). You may also want to contact music teachers in the same district to learn more about the program. This will aid you as you are selecting repertoire and set up your calendar for the year. Contact people at your school (activities director, athletic director, office manager, and/or student government teacher) to get a schedule of all events for the year. As you plan your calendar, when possible, avoid scheduling overlapping events. This will help to prevent students from becoming double booked and having to choose between activities.
- If you have access to your gradebook and can see your class rosters, you can begin memorizing names and faces. If the school counselors place students in ensembles, you might want to begin communicating with them regarding student placement in ensembles for the coming year. Also consider telling counselors that you

are looking for more singers in your non-auditioned ensembles, and that you'd like them to invite students to join.

Strategy Two: Creating a Culture of Trust

One of the biggest planning items you can consider in detail this summer is your approach to classroom management. A reactionary approach to unwanted behaviors can lead to unpredictable consequences for students and can break down trust between you and your students. Consider the following situations:

- What will your bathroom and water break policy be?
- How will you address forgotten music/materials?
- What is your plan for consequences for misbehavior? What do these consequences convey to your students?

Bathroom and Water Breaks

Students are human beings with human needs, just like teachers. This means that they will have human needs while in the classroom like needing a restroom break, a drink of water, or simply refocusing their mind. How will you handle these situations? Think of your classroom setting and how you can de-center paths to the restroom or water fountain. A simple hand gesture from a student and a nod or head shake from you can allow students to take care of their needs without distracting others. This is not to say there are no limits to the number of times students can leave the room, but this understanding reinforces to students you are coming from a place of kindness and understanding.

If you notice a student is often leaving the room or using breaks as a method for task avoidance, try documenting it for a week before checking in with that student privately. A private conversation where you can tell the student you're concerned about the amount of music making they are missing out on, rather than a punitive-sounding lecture to the entire class on day one, can work wonders when building rapport.

Missing Materials

Similarly, it is a good idea to plan how you will han-

dle missing materials. We've all forgotten something on our way out the door in the morning. What if, when you forgot your badge or building keys for the day, you were met with hostility and punitive action? This makes room for a clear path to resentment and a lack of trust. Students are no different. A plan for extra material, housed in an accessible place, can help students with occasional forgetfulness to still participate in class.

For forgotten music, this can be bright-colored "loaner" folders kept in a hanging file organizer near your desk. This will allow you to track who is missing their music without them having to miss out on participation simply by scanning the room for students with bright folders. In addition to having a box of pencils, you might find it helpful to Velcro pencils to the inside of student folders. You can also number folders and have labeled cubbies for folders to live when students leave them at school. This is a great project for your choir council or section leaders to tackle prior to the start of school!

In addition to these prepared materials, a clear policy for missing materials can help you discern which student may need help addressing chronic forgetfulness. Again, document how often students are missing their music or other materials and check in privately. This can help you understand why they are struggling with remembering their belongings. If you are making room for grace and checking in with students, you can assign consequences for continued missing materials with two or three allowances for human error.

Consequences for Misbehavior

Finally, let's get to the nuts-and-bolts of pre-planning for your classroom environment: the consequences for misbehavior. For effective consequences, think about what the intention is behind your consequences. The goal should not be punitive measures, absolute control, or manipulation of students, but rather to foster a safe, inclusive, musical environment. Make a list of unacceptable behaviors, then brainstorm a list of consequences for these behaviors. Consider the goal of your consequences and the possible outcomes of your actions. This includes the consequences for the student and the class. See an example in Table 1 on the next page.

There is no magic combination of consequences

for classroom management. Most techniques are like a recipe from a cooking book. Sometimes these ingredients are delicious, but sometimes you should scrap the entire recipe and find a dish that is a better fit for you. The essential points to classroom management are clear, predictable reactions; consequences that foster engagement, safety, and inclusion; and an explicit discussion on day one so students know what they can expect.

Once you've created a safe, well-defined environ-

ment for your student by explaining your expectations for human needs, occasional forgetfulness, and keeping the classroom safe and running smoothly through your management strategy, you can start to move on to the in-service planning and team-building games!

Strategy Three: Parting Tips for Your First Days

Your first week of school, particularly if you are

Table 1. Cause and Effect of Consequences

Unwanted behavior: talking while the teacher is giving instructions. This is distracting others around the talking student and means that instructions are given multiple times.

Possible Ineffective Consequences	Possible Negative Outcome/ Student Reaction	Try This Instead!
The teacher scolds the student in front of the class.	The student will feel embarrassed by the shaming tactic. The scolded student may argue back to save face in front of their peers. The rest of the class will also now know that they will be shamed by their teacher (meaning a less safe and respectful environment)	Non-verbally remind the student to stop talking by waiting for quiet before speaking and/or gesturing for quiet (e.g., finger to lips). The talking student may not notice these interventions, but the rest of the class will. They may even remind them for you to be quiet. Compliance with your expectations would be low stakes for the student talking. This tactic will also continuously reinforce to the whole class that you expect quiet during instructions.
Teacher increases the volume of instruction, piano, or recordings/ videos.	This is not addressing the problem. The increase in volume is not redirecting the issue and could increase vocal fatigue.	Pair reinforcing comments for students who are on task with zone of proximity for students who are talking during instruction. This can keep the focus on students who are on task while also reminding others of the expectations. Zone of proximity also pairs well with nonverbal redirection.

a first-year teacher, can be overwhelming. In-service week will be full of trainings, meetings, and to-do lists. For the first week of school, consider planning team-building activities such as those listed below. You can play games to learn names while helping singers to connect with one another. Playing these games also serves to inform you about your students. You may find out who your student leaders are, who prefers to work in small groups, and who might need extra attention. This is all great information when you refine your seating charts after the first week or two of classes. You might plan for a few possible team-building ideas each day, then see what fits best with the group dynamic. Here are some of our favorite ideas for team-building days:

Name Games

- *Story of your name:* Tell the class the story of how you got your name. This is an opportunity for students to learn more about each other and to memorize names, pronouns, and pronunciations.
- *Memory names games:* Pick a fun fact to pair with everyone's names (e.g., their name and a food that begins with the same letter) then recite everyone's name that came before you (and help each other to be successful) until the last person in the group attempts to name everyone and all their favorite things.

Ball Games

- *Balloon toss:* Give every student a balloon and a marker. They will write something about themselves on a balloon before circling up and scrambling their balloons and picking up a random balloon. Then the class will have ten minutes to chat with each other before everyone guesses whose balloon they think they have. One catch: you can't ask others directly if someone wrote the fun fact you have. You must discover their interests through a brief conversation.
- *The Classic Ball Game:* Divide the class into groups. Students hit the ball up in the air and count. The group that reaches the highest number within the time limit wins.

The count starts over if anyone uses two hands, hits the ball twice in a row, or the ball touches the ground.

- *Tape Ball:* Put small pieces of tape on a beach ball with prompts (e.g., what is your favorite place? What would you do with a million dollars? Where do you wish you could travel?) Toss across a standing circle, and wherever someone's thumb lands is the prompt they answer (after saying their name).

Miscellaneous Favorites

- *Snaps as positive affirmation* at any time during rehearsal. Remember, you can talk over snapping but not clapping. Build a culture of celebrating others while protecting our voices!
- *Ostinato design:* In small groups of 3-5, figure out a favorite something that everyone has in common. Then have the group use spoken word and body percussion to design a four-beat repeating phrase. Layer them together as a large group and repeat/rotate. This is great for meeting people in other sections.

Conclusion

Finding enough time to plan during the first few weeks of school can be challenging. If you are a person who likes to work ahead and is comfortable working during the summer, tackling some of the items mentioned above can help to ease that challenge. We hope that by beginning to think about classroom management, your classroom space, and the creation of your classroom culture, your first weeks will be filled with excitement and joy. Happy planning! 

Both **Dr. Kendra Taylor** and **Dr. Olivia Salzman-Coon** received their PhDs at the University of Oregon and teach music in the Pacific Northwest.