



Ask a Conductor

Question 7

What do you do with those students who don't often sing in your class? They say they enjoy being in choir, but I don't see evidence of this in their class performance, and their behavior during class is negatively impacting the group.

Welcome to the “Ask a Conductor” section of *ChorTeach*. In this reader-generated Q&A format, readers submit questions related to teaching, conducting, rehearsing with, or singing with K-12 students. Educators who either currently work in K-12 or who have past experience in K-12 will answer the question, with a new question appearing in each issue. Our goal is for this to be a very practical section that applies directly to current concerns in the choral classroom. Readers can submit questions via the link in this Google form (<https://forms.gle/oVcamzqp4KwXfo5M9>) or by visiting the QR code below.

Ask a Conductor Submission Form



Question: What do you do with those students who don't often sing in your class? They say they enjoy being in choir, but I don't see evidence of this in their class performance, and their behavior during class is negatively impacting the group.



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In my experience, lack of participation or negative behavior stems from lack of expectation, lack of positive relationship(s), lack of engaging rehearsals, or some combination of the three. Most of my advice is given with middle grades in mind, but I have found the following ideas to be transferable to all ages.

1) *Expectations*

Students will only rise to the level of expectation we set for them. Expectations need to be addressed explicitly in the first week and revisited periodically, preferably *before* something has gone wrong. I have found it crucial to include expectations in my Choir Handbook, which is given out and explained in the first rehearsal and also summarized to parents in our first parent meeting. The handbook includes all performance dates, assessment dates, advocacy strategies for parents, and more. It is also important to have consequences clearly laid out in the handbook, and that consequences are utilized appropriately. I use student conferences, parent contact,



educational assignments, and even removal from the program as potential discipline steps in accordance with our school-wide discipline plan. If singing is an expectation of the class, either the student is meeting the expectation, or they are not. If they are not, then I would examine the next two areas before moving into disciplinary action.

2) *Relationships*

When considering my relationship to the students, they will care about my program as much as I care about them. I intentionally try to be visible and conversational with students outside of rehearsal during the school day. I think of relationships like a bank: if I want to get something out of it, then I need to put something into it. For me, lunch duty has been a perfect time to work on building relationships with students.

Then I like to examine the culture in the classroom between the students. Are they seated in a manner that promotes friendship without sliding off task? Are students conversing with each other and laughing before or after class? Smiles between students are what I look for in these transitions. I also try to pinpoint students who do not seem to be socially inclined, and I make an attempt to help facilitate relationships between them and other choir members. It is important to prioritize a proper supportive culture in rehearsals. My students regularly say, “Choir is a family,” and that dynamic takes guidance in order to achieve it.

3) *Engagement*

Students need stability, consistency, and economy of language for rehearsals and instruction. These can be achieved through routine, consistency in holding to procedure and relationships, and concise clarity of instruction. I heard pastor say many times, “I hope to be finished speaking before you’re finished listening,” and I try to maintain that mindset when introducing a piece, making adjustments, and teaching every single day. Economy of language ensures that my words will have weight and maximizes the opportunity for retention. Beyond that, I try to make sure students are physically engaged in the rehearsal and in music making. Music is movement.

While there is no such thing as a “one-size-fits-all” approach to teaching choir, when asked about a student’s lack of engagement, I would first search for deficiencies in these three areas. Good luck to everyone with your next school year!



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There are many factors that influence singing. The deep emotional roots of singing can be freeing and deeply satisfying, but in some cases can bring up less positive feelings as well. As a community choir director, it was rare for someone to come into my choir and not sing. I have had young children come into the choir who didn’t sing initially or sang so softly that it seemed they weren’t singing, but this was usually temporary. A middle school boy who hadn’t sung in a choir before coming to us told me he just loved being in the middle of the sound. I was eventually able to convince him that it was more fun to be part of that sound!

If a chorister says they enjoy choir, they have a reason for being there, and it is our responsibility as directors to help them find their place. My first step is to meet separately with a non-singer or shy singer. I start by asking a few questions about their experience in class.

Do they like the music?

What do they like about being in choir?

Would they feel more comfortable on a different part?

Is the issue vocal?

Going through a voice check may uncover changes that make the singer feel awkward in their current place.

Is the issue social?

Are they uncomfortable around their peers? Would they be better placed in a different section or next to a different person? Are they afraid of making mistakes or just not sure of their abilities? Would it help to have a choir buddy system to connect kids who aren’t already connected?

Is the issue emotional?

Does singing bring up personal feelings that are difficult to share? They don’t have to share the details unless they wish to, but the acknowledgement is important.



Above all, it's important to let the singer know that you care about them and are willing to work with them. This may take time but is well worth the effort.



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How to address this problem depends on the specifics of the situation. First, make sure you diagnose the problem accurately and are not contributing to it. How do the students see the situation? Are your expectations clear to everyone involved? Does your teaching encourage engagement? You can address these matters directly with your students. You may also have to consider how the culture of the school as a whole influences the problem.

Try to see through the students' eyes. Ask them why they joined choir and what they like about it. Then you can begin to address the problem in a useful way. In high school, I joined choir because the teacher noticed my interest in music in eighth grade and nurtured it. In middle school, I ended up in chorus because a friend dragged me with him. In elementary school, the teacher drafted me into choir along with most of my classmates with no real explanation. Getting students engaged in these scenarios requires very different approaches.

Make certain your expectations for participation align with school policy and that you have the support of your administration. Communicate your expectations to students and parents from the beginning and follow them consistently. In your day-to-day teaching, make eye contact, wait for attention, and persist in requiring participation. If necessary, rearrange seating to break up troublesome groups or place students who need extra supervision close to you.

Use teaching techniques that encourage participation. Keep instruction fast paced but organized. Include a balance of challenging and easier tasks in each rehearsal. Use a variety of student groupings and types of activity in each class. Avoid speaking more than thirty seconds at a time.

You may want to record a rehearsal to see how you do at these things or have a trusted person observe you.

The problem is more difficult if it stems from systemic factors or school culture. Dealing with this takes time and support from others. You will need to consider the following: How do counselors, administration, and parents view the role of the ensemble in the curriculum and the life of the school and community? Is there pressure to perform? Is there real support for high standards? What are your goals for the group?

In one school I served, counselors routinely placed students who needed an easy elective in beginning choir whether or not they had any interest in singing. It was hard to provide a good choral experience for those who wanted it while managing those who did not. I suggested starting a general music class for students who needed an elective but did not want to perform and promised to adapt the class to whomever signed up. Eventually (when it solved a problem of theirs) the counselors and curriculum coordinator agreed to add the class. From that point, I could help my administration, meet the needs of a wider range of students, and turn beginning choir into a productive training ground for freshmen who loved to sing. **CT**