

NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 2)

ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

Compiled by
Amanda Bumgarner,
Choral Journal editor



JENNIFER ALARCON

Years Teaching: 6
Southwest Division
Director of Choirs,
Blalack Middle School
alarconj@cfbisd.edu



ELIZABETH BATEY

Years Teaching: 9
Northwestern Division
Director of Choral Activities,
Sawtooth Middle School
Idaho ACDA JH/MS R&S Chair
Batey.Elizabeth@westada.org



DESIREE BONDLEY

Years Teaching: 11
North Central Division
Choir Director, Wachter Middle School
West Region Choral Representative,
North Dakota MEA
desiree_bondley@bismarckschools.org

*“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken
joy in creative expression and knowledge.”*

—Albert Einstein

**SETH BOYD**

Years Teaching: 9
 North Central Division
 Elementary School Teacher,
 Minnetonka Public Schools
seth.boyd@minnetonka.k12.mn.us

**JENNIFER SENGIN**

Years Teaching: 5
 Eastern Division
 Director of Choirs,
 East Brunswick High School
jennifersengin@gmail.com

**DAVID BURTON**

Years Teaching: 8
 Northwestern Division
 Choral Director, Boise High School
 Idaho Music Educators
 District III Vice President
 Idaho ACDA Ethnic &
 Multicultural Choirs R&S Chair
david.burton@boiseschools.org

**PHILIP SILVEY**

Years Teaching: 22
 Eastern Division
 Assistant Professor of Music Education,
 Eastman School of Music
philipesilvey@gmail.com

**DARLA ESHELMAN**

Years Teaching: 34
 Southwestern Division
 Oklahoma ACDA Vice President
 Professor of Music Education &
 Coordinator for Vocal Music Education,
 University of Central Oklahoma
deselman@uco.edu

**JACOB TRUBY**

Years Teaching: 4
 North Central Division
 Vocal Music Teacher,
 Beloit Memorial High School
jtruby@sdb.k12.wi.us

**ELIZABETH MCFARLAND**

Years Teaching: 10
 Southwestern Division
 Division R&S Chair for
 Youth & Student Activities
 Deputy Director,
 The St. Louis Children's Choirs
 PhD Candidate in Music Education,
 The University of Missouri
elizabeth@slccsing.org

**BRANDON WILLIAMS**

Years Teaching: 10
 Central Division
 DMA Student in Choral Conducting,
 Michigan State University
will2570@msu.edu

NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 2)

After years of school and at least one semester of student teaching, choral education majors make the transition from student to fulltime teacher of their own choral classroom. As the excitement and anticipation of a new school year intersect with the fear of all the unknowns for the months ahead, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. This three-part article is a first for the *Choral Journal*: eleven choral teachers with decades of teaching experience between them answer ten questions on topics geared specifically to the concerns of a first-year teacher. Each question has answers from at least four and no more than six respondents, and answers are listed in alphabetical order by last name. Part 1 (May 2015) addressed:

#1: Setting Expectations for the First Year

#2: Classroom Management and Structuring Rehearsals

#3: Balancing a Successful Work and Home Life

Part two will answer the following questions:

#4: Dealing with First-Year Surprises

How should I approach dealing with administration, other teachers, and parents? How do I navigate school policies and traditions?

#5: Relating Choir to Other Subjects/Activities

How can I make sure my choir is valued and supported by the school system?

#6: Assessment in the Classroom

How do I best establish a grading strategy?

It is the editor's hope that this article is encouraging, inspiring, and most importantly helpful to *Choral Journal* readers who are in their first few years of teaching. Of course, educators with a decade or more of experience will likely still enjoy reading the comments of their colleagues and perhaps even be inspired and encouraged themselves. Part three will present answers to questions

7-10 and will appear in the September 2015 issue.

QUESTION #4:

Dealing with First-Year Surprises

**How should I approach dealing with administration, other teachers, and parents?
How do I navigate school policies and traditions?**



Elizabeth Batey

First-year surprises happen the first year of teaching and the first year at a new school. Sometimes you have first-year surprises in the second and third years as well. The reality is, you will have surprises; it is the nature of the beast we call teaching choir. When approaching your administration, it is always the best policy to be honest and frank. Remember that they are your bosses, they are interested in your success, and they are your best resource when you have serious doubts. If your administrator puts you on the spot or surprises you in any way, it is okay for you to ask for time to process what was discussed and ask if you can revisit the discussion the next day. Before the next meeting, write down all of the questions or concerns that you have. Do your best to work with your administrator to find a resolution or compromise.

Sometimes working with other teachers can be challenging. When there is a conflict that comes up with another teacher and myself, I try to imagine where they are coming from. It helps to stay positive and keep emotions out of the conversations. Do your best to resolve issues face-to-face and in private so that students are not involved. If you feel that a compromise cannot be reached or the issue cannot be resolved, it is wise to contact your administrator and fill them in on the situation.

Parents can be very kind or very abusive depending on the circumstance. In my experience, the tone can be set in the communication I establish at the beginning of the year. When working with parents, communication is

ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

the key. I send home a flyer with information on the program and myself as well as how to contact me by phone, e-mail, and the school website. I also send home regular e-mails to parents updating them on choral activities. At concerts, I provide a list of upcoming events, I make myself available to chat with parents before and after the concert, and sometimes I organize after-concert dessert parties where I personally thank the parents for all they do for the program. I find it important to make myself available and approachable.

Navigating school policies and traditions can be the most difficult aspect of a new teaching position. It is important to read all documents and implement as many policies as you can in your classroom immediately. Ask for help. I recommend asking for a building mentor you can go to before bothering your administrator regarding policies and expectations. If you find you have made a mistake, acknowledge it, assure your administration you will never do it again, and move forward. Everyone makes mistakes; it is how you choose to resolve it that matters. Adopt as many of the traditions of the school as you can. Learn the fight song and sing it immediately. If there is a tradition that goes against everything you believe in as a music educator, talk to your administration. If they support you and your vision, it should not be an issue. If they loved the tradition, perhaps you can compromise and turn it into something you do like. If they love the tradition and want to keep it as is, remain positive, work hard, and do your best to complete the task.



Darla Eshelman

I strongly believe that a general plan of action for a new teacher is to enter the classroom/rehearsal with respect for who was there before you and regard for all existing components of the school itself. If there is a long-standing tradition of choral excellence at a school or if your predecessor was particularly held in high regard, students will likely be musically and emotionally attached to their former director. This is a precious and loyal relationship and should be handled with care. Your new presence should be a respectful reflection of the past. Just as a beautiful musical phrase is carefully shaped and conducted, balanc-

ing a healthy regard for tradition and predecessors while delicately introducing your unique approach to the “same phrase” is critical to musical success and emotional growth for both you and your students. You will find yourself unpleasantly surprised if you imply “out with the old and in with the new” through your planning, actions, and programming decisions.

Another first-year surprise may be the amount of your choral budget. Just as musical experience between different students and schools will vary, so will the amount of money designated for purchasing music. In my first year of teaching, I was shocked to be handed a budget that could pay for about thirty copies of three octavos for the entire year, for all choirs. Coming up with alternative ways to place music in my students’ hands became an immediate priority. Considerations can include PTO or community donations, fundraisers, borrowing music from colleagues, and applying for grants of various kinds.



Jennifer Sengin

Your first year will be challenging regardless of your music teacher training. Even if you are as prepared as possible, difficult situations will arise. Accept that this will happen and take every opportunity to remain calm and learn from the inevitable mistakes you will make. In most teaching situations, you will encounter some resistance and phrases that begin with, “Last year we...” Listen to all of these responses, avoiding responding defensively, and apply the ideas that will work for you. Take note of school traditions and try not to make many significant changes in your first year. Instead, observe the community and the importance of the traditions to current and former students. If changes need to be made, begin in the following year. For example, if choirs sing “Hallelujah Chorus” every year, keep it for at least one year and consider all possible outcomes before making any decisions. It is also important to be prepared for anything. For example, my choir is often called upon to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at various school events. Therefore, I teach that piece early in the year so I am prepared at a moment’s notice.

Approach everyone with kindness all of the time. This concept is especially important when you are not met with

NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 2)

kindness. In the same way that you are focused on your program, others have their own priorities. Keep that in mind when you speak to people and consider their points of view. You can often resolve a tense situation if you are calm and considerate. When working with administrators, keep in mind that they are running an entire school; your issue might not be a priority. When I encounter a challenge, I try to find several solutions to present to the administration. I receive the best outcomes using this method, and the administration often provides an additional solution. Professionalism is key when dealing with a difficult situation.

Kindness is important when dealing with parents, since they can be your greatest support system. Make positive phone calls home so parents do not only hear from you when something is wrong. Parents really appreciate hearing positive information. This simple gesture will also help you to win students over in your first few years of teaching. Student “buy-in” is critical, so taking the time to recognize students who are doing well is helpful.

If someone does something nice for you or your program, thank those individuals each and every time. People will be more inclined to help you out again if they feel their efforts were appreciated.



Philip Silvey

Your first year is a period of “information gathering.” It takes time to find out how everything in a school system works. Be patient. It’s impossible to immediately know and understand everything. At the beginning, you will tend to operate on assumptions or expectations (typically based on your own past experience) that may not apply in this new setting. This happens to all people in their first year at a new job. The moments when you suddenly learn you overlooked or contradicted an important custom can be embarrassing. Your students, colleagues, and superiors will understand, as long as you acknowledge and admit your misunderstandings in a forthright manner.

The way you treat people matters. Every person you encounter in the school plays an important role in the functioning of the entire school. Your relationship with

the principal matters, yes, but so does your relationship with the front office secretary, with the person who cleans your room, and with the cafeteria staff. Take time to get to know everyone who touches the life of the school. People talk to one another, and their view of you and how you are perceived as a newcomer will be shaped by the impressions you leave with each of them. When unexpected challenges arise, these people will serve as important advocates.

Despite your best efforts to anticipate any issues, at times you may feel blindsided. A parent objecting to a grade you have given her child or a principal siding with cheerleaders who claim they cannot attend your concert scheduled on a game night can undermine your confidence. These are delicate matters. Your ability to communicate in a calm, clear manner will serve you well. Whenever possible, arrange face-to-face meetings to discuss and resolve any conflicts or misunderstandings. Represent yourself with clarity, ask questions, and listen.

QUESTION #5:

Relating Choir to Other Subjects/Activities

How can I make sure my choir is valued and supported by the school system?



Elizabeth Batey

While working on my masters, I wrote an intensive paper on why music educators seem to burn out at a faster rate than educators of many other subjects. One of the reasons that came up in the research was that music educators felt as if they were “second class” teachers, not valued by their administrators and the rest of the staff. This is a problem I think many of us face daily within our school walls: how do I create a sense of value for my program within the school? While I am not sure there are any definitive answers, I can share what has worked for me and the schools I’ve worked for.

As much as I would like the opposite to be true, the

ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

music teacher is the face of the music program. How you present yourself to the school, the staff, the parents, the administration, and the district will dictate how your program is perceived. If you are happy and positive, they will most likely view your program as positive. If you are overly aggressive and negative, they will most likely view your program as negative. You are in public relations, and you must remember that if you would like your program to thrive, you must have a strategy to sell it. Now that you know you are the face of the program, you must make your program visible and valuable. Look for openings or needs that your choir can fulfill musically within your building. Need a February fundraiser to help the National Junior Honor Society? Team up with them and split the profits from singing valentines. Offer to have the choir sing carols before the December district meetings at the district office. It will make your principal look good and your program look better. Very rarely do I turn down an opportunity to have my choir participate in any school event.



Desiree Bondley

I like to have home-base performances so that the rest of the student body and staff can see and hear the choir's accomplishments. I save some time at the end of the performance to do some large group singing that includes the audience. If you are thinking bigger, volunteer to have your groups perform at school activities. This could be something as small as a staff meeting where you have the choir sing a selection from an upcoming concert. Finally, get involved! Do not sit to the side with an "I'm just a music director" mentality. Volunteer within the school to show you are a well-rounded and team-playing educator.



Seth Boyd

If you want your choirs to be valued by the school system, get your students out in the community whenever possible. Have them perform "The Star-Spangled Banner" at sporting events,

sing at graduation, perform at parties, and make recordings. Make them ambassadors of your school district. That said, do not send your choirs out before they are ready. While they do not have to be perfect, you want to convey to the audience that the students sound good and enjoy what they do. If your administrators hear about good things the choir is doing, they are more likely to be supportive of your program.

Getting other teachers to value your program is a bit more complicated, particularly other teachers who are competing with you for your students' time and energy. The first rule is to be flexible when you can. If you play nice with the coaches, the band and orchestra directors, and the theatre director, you have the right to expect them to do the same with you (and they probably will). Also, keep your ears open for interesting opportunities to collaborate with other disciplines. Can your choir perform a poem being studied in an English class? Can you invite the German teacher to help your choirs with the pronunciation of a song? I have never taught at a school with an auto shop, but I have always thought it would be fun to write a song in collaboration with an auto shop class where the sounds that a car makes could be part of the music. Also, show up at other events if at all possible. This will pay dividends with students and teachers. You may even find you are having a good time!



Elizabeth McFarland

Try to maintain a global, or school-wide, perspective on your program and its needs; remember that there is a finite amount of resources that your principal is working within. Always ask for what you want and need, and be understanding if you are told no the first time. However, keep asking! If you feel that your administration does not understand or value the work that you do in class, put those teaching skills to good use and help them learn! Help them see the good that is going on in your classroom by inviting them in to witness lessons that you feel exemplify the choral experience.

Do your best to contribute to the positive climate of your school by participating in assemblies or preparing your students to sing the national anthem, hallway carols

NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 2)

in December, or the school fight song as needed. Ask your colleagues and your students about what is going on in other areas of their lives and show support. When you hear students say good things about other teachers, pass along the compliment. Remember to help your students and community connect to opportunities and resources outside of the school that are related to choral music. Set an example of active community engagement for your students by fostering musical relationships with colleagues and neighbors.



Brandon Williams

Choir should not be related to other subjects for the sake of establishing its value; it has value in itself. It is good, however, to link subjects in an interdisciplinary manner to foster enhanced learning. The best way to promote the value of the choir program is to make people aware of what it is you teach and how students learn from your instruction. Many of your parents, administrators, and colleagues will have a limited idea of what takes place in your classroom. Utilize concerts, “meet the teacher” nights, parent/teacher conferences, awards ceremonies, or other events to demonstrate some of the specific things you teach. Those gatherings could allow observers the opportunity to not only see you interact with your students but also hear growth from the ensemble.

In my experience, administrators typically only attend final performances. Consider inviting them into your classroom so they can experience instruction throughout the concert cycle. Additionally, get your students out of the classroom to serenade the halls. This allows them additional chances to share their singing throughout the building and experience the challenges presented by different acoustic environments. Most importantly, let everyone see how passionate you are about the choral art. As Robert Henri said, “Everything depends on the attitude of the artist toward his subject. It is essential.”

QUESTION #6:

Assessment in the Classroom

How do I best establish a grading strategy?



Jennifer Alarcon

Prior to school starting, sit down with a calendar and make an assessment plan. First, create a rubric for daily or weekly rehearsal technique. These are the behaviors that need to be shown during rehearsal. Behaviors include tall choral posture while singing, refraining from talking during transitions, use of appropriate vowel shapes, positive attitude, and using solfège or number hand signs.

Second is pitch and rhythm assessment. Perhaps every week or every other week, assess pitch and rhythm. This can be as simple as having students clap and count a 4-8 measure rhythmic pattern in groups of three or more or having students echo back a pitch pattern of four pitches on a neutral syllable. Remember that assessment is a tool to see where your singers are so that you can scaffold future rehearsals to help build their skills. It should not be so difficult that they are unable to be successful. Also remember that singing alone can feel very vulnerable. Work them up to solo singing by allowing them a partner at first, which may help to build their confidence.



Desiree Bondley

The middle school level in my district is in the process of transitioning to standard-based grading. Eighth grade is still graded traditionally, while the sixth and seventh grades see standard-based grading on their reports. Regardless, the standards remain the same. Reporting out just looks different. My colleagues and I decided on three to four “Need to Know” standards. From there, we created proficiency scales to use in our assessments. We asked ourselves, “What does a student need to demonstrate in

ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

order to reach a 1, 2, 3, or 4 score?” Or, in grades, “What does a student need to demonstrate in order to reach an A, B, or C?”

Next, we created a rubric-type of assessment. This allows us to keep a record of how each student is doing. It may take some time to assess, but this one-on-one time allows us to see our students’ current abilities and their progress and give us the opportunity to meet individually. Working individually with the students helps the entire group. I also keep a daily record of points. Each student begins with ten points. Participation, attitude, etc. can affect the number of points they earn by the end of the day. At the end of the week, I report the total points in the gradebook. Eighth grade sees percentages on their reports, while the sixth and seventh grades receive a grade for “Respect” and “Responsibility” in the form of an M (meets expectations), P (partially meets expectations), or N (needs improvement).



Seth Boyd

Directing a choir and prepping for a concert does not give me much time to teach things that fit within a pencil and paper test. If I have to have something on paper to grade, I make it practical. My students are beginning singers, and I often ask myself, “What would I want my students to know about music if they grew up to be an accountant and decided to sing in their church choir?” I think in that case, I want them to know a little bit about musical style and history so that they will understand performance practice, how to find a measure on a page, and which staff to read (or which staff to look below to find the words they sing). My tests focus on those basic facts and skills.

I also think grading things like matching pitch and tone production are perfectly acceptable, even with my young singers (ten- and eleven-year-olds). The key is giving positive feedback that helps them improve (i.e., try again but this time use a little more air) rather than a statement that offers no hope (i.e., you can’t match pitch) and to celebrate improvement over perfect achievement of a goal. In pitch-matching assessments, I ask the choir to listen to a student sing and judge not on the basis of how well he or she sang

but on whether or not the student improved. At the end of assessing about four or five kids, I ask the choir to identify individuals who improved by name and give them an extra round of applause. If they accidentally identify someone who did everything perfectly right away, I say, “You’re right that the person met the standard, but they did it right the first time. People who can do that get applause at other times. [To the identified student], I hope it doesn’t hurt your feelings, but we’re not going to clap for you right now because we are focusing on improvement, not instant success.” I have never had a student react badly.

Finally, after a concert I break my students up into small groups and make them sing the music for me for a grade. It is more than fair to expect that after a concert students know how to perform the material you have been teaching for weeks. If they don’t, you have every right to mark a low grade down. Just make sure the size of the group is right when you assess. With my elementary students, I make sure that there are two people on every part so no one sings alone. I might not be that forgiving in a college-level ensemble.



David Burton

I will be honest: this is something that I am always reevaluating in my teaching. I have found that when I sit down with the standards and look at what I am doing, as long as I am staying true to the principles of teaching solid technique to build well-informed musicians using quality literature, I am reaching the goals of the standards. It is important to remember that in regard to grading we need to assess their skill and ability *and* the traditional participation portion. Both elements are important. What we do is a skill that must be practiced consistently, and therefore participation is a valid component to grade. However, we need to also assess their understanding of music concepts and skills. This is most authentically done through some sort of performance review, like a part check, and/or through the creation of a portfolio of some kind.

NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 2)




Elizabeth McFarland

Ask what expectations are at your new school and in your district. Other performing arts teachers and those who came before you can provide a great starting place for setting up your grading system. Consider moving your grading away from attendance- or participation-only points. If you assign a daily grade, you can grade on a specific skill each day rather than just participation. Students who perform in a concert demonstrate audience and performer etiquette, mastery of musical ideas, choral skills (watching the conductor, singers posture, poise on stage, etc.), and more. Help parents understand what students are learning and why choir should be considered an in-school academic subject by grading on specific, learnable skills! In doing so, you teach students and parents what to look for in a successful choir singer and choral program.



Brandon Williams

You cannot assess something you do not teach. We teach vocal technique, and students should receive a level of feedback on their individual performance. Some programs have a system for calculating choir grades based solely on character traits such as being on time, being prepared, actively participating, and behaving well. Those are important and necessary skills, but the performance component is usually nonexistent. I implemented an assessment where each student used his or her phone or tablet device to record themselves while the entire ensemble performed a passage from our concert literature. Students can email the files with or without a personal assessment of their performance, and then I listen or read and assign a grade. Grades are based on tone, pitch, rhythm, diction, and musicality. It is important that your students have a thorough understanding of the rubric you have in place. I have found that this method requires much less preparation and class time, is less threatening, and provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their work. 

Learn and grow professionally through ACDA's mentoring program.



**Open to all undergraduate and graduate students and beginning to established choral directors.
More information is available at: <http://mentoring.acda.org>**