

# NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 1)

## ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

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

*—Albert Einstein*

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# NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 1)

After many 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 one will answer the following questions:

## #1: Setting Expectations

How do I set realistic expectations for my first year of teaching? What do I tackle first?

## #2: Classroom Management and Structuring Rehearsals

What do I do with my students? How do I handle difficult classroom situations?

## #3: Balance

How do I balance my personal life and the stress of a new job? How do I balance the roles of educator and musician?

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 two will present answers to questions four, five, and six and will appear in the August 2015 issue.

### QUESTION #1:

#### Setting Expectations

How do I set realistic expectations for my first year of teaching? What do I tackle first?



David Burton

Your first year of teaching is a whirlwind. No matter how well prepared you are coming out of your collegiate program and no matter how well your student teaching experience went, you will find that there are so many things that you cannot prepare for as a teacher and must learn as you go. Do not feel like you have to be teacher of the year in the first year. If you get to the end of it and still want to come back next year, it was a success. With all of this being said, here are a few things I suggest you give more attention to in the first year.

First, becoming a master at classroom management is vital. It does not matter what music you have selected, how extensive your musical knowledge is, or how well planned your rehearsals are. If you do not know how to get students focused and engaged on task, you will not be able to do anything. Second, let your students, colleagues, and administrators see the joy you find in teaching and feel the love you have for making music. This will set the tone for every interaction you will have for the remainder of your career. Third, start networking. The very best music educators became the very best because they have a vast network of colleagues that they can call on when questions come up. Fourth, establish your expectations and vision for the type of choral program you are seeking to build during your tenure. Set the standard for the quality of literature you will study, the

expectations for rehearsal decorum, the level of effort and work you expect from students, and other related items that guide the students, school, and community into your vision for the future of the program.

Of course, as you are doing these things you will be teaching music and performing concerts and all of the other commitments that are a part of what we do. The first year is your best opportunity to establish the climate, expectations, and vision that will guide all of the music making that will happen for many years to come.



Darla Eshelman

Care, communication, and conscientious repertoire selection are essential for addressing immediately in any new teaching position. First on my list of realistic expectations would be to better understand the truth found in Theodore Roosevelt's statement, "Students don't care what you know until they know that you care." It took a while to realize that the choir in front of me was not the choir I sang with in college. My students did not care to focus on what I knew from being a music major or performer; their level of trust and engaged interaction was always more directly correlated with how much they felt I cared about them. It has been thirty years since my first teaching job, and Roosevelt's statement continues to ring true through my current students' comments, body language, dispositions, and rehearsal responses. When students feel safe, cared about, and know you are truly investing in them as musicians and as people, it is then that they will work the hardest and make the most advances in choral singing.

Good communication with administrators, colleagues, parents, and students is another important component to



# ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

tackle from the first day. Avoid conflicts by keeping everyone informed of your goals, plans, activities, and performances for the year in a timely and positive manner. All major events should be approved and listed on the school calendar and available at the beginning of the year. When there are changes, make sure the information reaches everyone involved. Further, communicate to your principal that you believe choral music is essential to the curriculum. For many administrators, words are not enough to convince them that your program is worthwhile. Dedication to the students, enthusiasm toward your program, and careful organization are important keys for maintaining good communication and support. It will be an added bonus if your administrator's own children become involved in your program. It is often through this connection that uninformed administrators develop a deeper and more sustaining relation with your choral program.

Setting up a yearly cycle of conscientious repertoire selection is another important task. Having an ideal choral sound and advanced music to work toward is essential; however, if repertoire choices are consistently beyond the ensemble's ability level, this becomes frustrating and counterproductive. Challenge is indeed a critical component of the choral teaching and learning process, but this should be carefully balanced with the realistic level and needs of each individual group. The voicings you select for your middle school or high school ensembles could be anywhere from unison to eight-part. It all depends on the level of the group in front of you and the number of males and females involved. The most recent and impressionable choral sound in a young teacher's musical mind is typically that of their college ensemble and recordings of prestigious and reputable choirs. While an advanced and challenging level of choral singing is desirable, a more tailored approach to

each individual school setting is essential for success with repertoire selection, program planning, and ultimately to student growth. Remember that prior musical training, literacy, and skill levels vary widely; therefore, selecting literature should include a carefully thought out process of meeting the students where they are and challenging them to grow to a higher level of choral singing.



**Elizabeth McFarland**

There are so many small details that will become necessary for your daily life as a choral director, but one first-year task often pushed to the back burner is potentially one of the most productive.

Take time to set big goals by answering some very important questions:

1. Why do I teach music?
2. What is special/important about choral music?
3. What do I want my students to remember upon leaving the classroom?
4. What do my students need from me? From choir? From the world?

Once you have answered these questions, think about how you will convey that purpose every day in your classroom. This will inform how you structure your rehearsal, what kind of literature



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you select, how you deal with discipline challenges, and who you become as a teacher. It is challenging to set aside time for this important way of envisioning your future as an educator and music leader, but doing so impacts everything else you will do.



**Jacob Truby**

If you have entered a vocal music position that does not appear to accommodate student and teacher needs, do not hesitate to ask why that could be and what could be done to fix it! It became quickly apparent during my first few weeks of teaching at Beloit Memorial High School that the makeup of choirs

at the school was not accommodating to the developing voice and the growing musician. As a result, our 1,800-person high school only had about 110 students in choir. At the time of my arrival, the school offered three mixed choirs and a treble choir. This caused many moments of frustration among the students and myself. Members of the treble choir, for example, were the unfortunate bearers of negative connotations and were perceived as being in the "weak" or "bad" choir. It was, however, clear to me that every student in every ensemble was frustrated with the speed with which we were learning and creating music. Skilled singers were frustrated that they were in choirs with students who could not match pitch. Beginning singers were frustrated because they could not navi-

gate through choral scores as quickly as others. Very early on, I realized that a total revamping of the department was necessary.

Just two months in, I pitched a choir program to the school board that consisted of four choirs, three of them being gender specific (two women's choirs and a men's chorus), with only the top choir being mixed. This was approved, and as a result our numbers grew from 110 to over 250 two years later (and we have since added two more choirs). It became safer to learn how to sing! It was a delicate process explaining the new choir makeup to the students in the spring, but I have heard nothing but positive things from students and how much more they enjoy the environment of the new ensemble.

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It was that first year of teaching that was the hardest for me, where I was working with choirs of vastly different student abilities and interest levels, oftentimes in the same choir. The band director at my high school kept my hopes up by repeating to me throughout the year, "It takes at least three years to see major change in a program." Do not stress if things are challenging in the beginning—it could be why the job was open in the first place. However, even if you are a new teacher, do not be afraid to get to the root of the problem and make change happen.

## QUESTION #2:

### Structuring Rehearsals and Classroom Management

What do I do with my students?  
How do I handle difficult classroom situations?



Elizabeth Batey

Come up with a plan before day one of class starts. Know how you want rehearsal to flow and why in that order. Sometimes you will have problems with the rehearsal or your classroom management, so do not be afraid to ask a colleague or administrator to come observe your class; you can also videotape yourself, as I have done many times. At one school where I taught, I only had thirty-five minutes to teach my sixth-grade choir, which I felt was not enough time to properly warm-up and rehearse all of their songs. After a week or so of careful time analysis, I noticed that it took my students close to five minutes every day to walk to the risers and get settled for warm-ups. I formulated a plan where I began warm-

ups from the piano as the bell rang, and the students sang while they walked into the room and onto the risers. Not only did warm-ups begin faster, but we became more efficient and effective with our time.

In the realm of classroom management, you will come across the student who will test you. Above all else, it is important to remember two things: First, you have a plan, which we will talk about shortly. Second, you are the adult in the situation, and you have options when it comes to dealing with students who deliberately put you in tough situations. Here is what I suggest you do for your plan: talk to your administrator and have a system in place for when students demonstrate inappropriate behavior. I give a warning the first time, phone and e-mail home the second time, and the third time I repeat the contacts home and involve the administration. All of the actions I take are written down in a student behavior log to protect myself and the student should we need to revisit those behaviors at a later date. Keep those lines of communication open between parents and administration, and you should not have any problems.



Desiree Bondley

I always begin the year with my expectations known and a high standard for my classroom. When it comes to rehearsals, I like to get started right away, even before the bell rings. A few years ago, I started requiring my students to begin a music journal. I write music-related writing prompts on the board for students to reflect on the minute they get into the classroom. This gets them thinking about music before we even sing the first note, and it allows me time to take attendance and answer any questions individually.

I have a little book that has music

prompts (*Music Journal Topics* by Peggy Neal Klein Morton). I have also found several prompts online and made up some of my own. There are times when I will play a song or video for them and let them reflect. I also give them "Free Write Fridays" to allow them to write whatever they would like. Here are a couple examples of some prompts I've used: "Tell me about a song that reminds you of your parents." "If you could meet any musician, dead or alive, who would you want to meet? What would you ask them?" I will also throw in music theory questions from time to time, especially if it is something we will be covering in choir that day. There are expectations for the journals as well: each entry must have the date and prompt, the student must write two or more complete sentences per entry, and journal entries must be legible and organized.

A few times a semester, I take the time to read each journal. It is time-consuming, but the benefits far outweigh the time I put into reading them. For one, I have a large class, and it can be very difficult to go around the room and get to know my students individually. Through their writing, students get to share things about themselves that they might not otherwise share out loud in the class. I make comments in their journals as I read them. Sometimes it might just be a general comment like "fun!" Other times, when necessary, I will give them some words of encouragement.

Through the journals, I also get to see the role music plays in my students' lives; I learn their musical interests and what they already may or may not know about music. Later, in conversations with the students, I can refer back to what is going on in their lives to see how things are going or how an event turned out that they were excited about. In this way, the journals open up communication. Sometimes I will allow them the opportunity to share what they wrote with the class. If they have reflected on

# NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 1)

a particular music video, we may take some time during the beginning of class to discuss. I find it so important in middle school to give them these opportunities to share. We obviously cannot do it every day, but if the class is actively and respectfully participating in the discussion, we grow as a group. Then, when it is time to work together musically, the connection is already there. I have been doing this for a few years now and have been so happy with the outcome. I know my students better, and they know I am invested in their lives.



**Jennifer Sengin**

I address difficult classroom situations by having a very specific plan in place that keeps students engaged throughout the rehearsal. Incorporating an introductory assignment at the beginning of class provides students with immediate instruction when they arrive to the rehearsal. In addition to students retrieving their folders at the

beginning of class, they are required to do a short assignment that will relate to the material for the class period. For example, students may be asked to look over a sight-reading example, prepare to chant a rhythmic passage, or review for a performance assessment. All of these activities correlate directly to rehearsal objectives and encourage students to engage in the class activities even before the rehearsal begins.

Immediately following the introductory assignment, I begin with a physical warm-up to address alignment, followed by warm-ups that address vocal technique. It is important to have an understanding of vocal pedagogy and to develop warm-ups that meet the needs of the students. After the vocal technique exercises, we sing warm-ups that address ear-training and the needs of the repertoire. For example, if the repertoire has a challenging interval, one might design a warm-up that incorporates this interval. If the repertoire includes chromatic motion, one can teach chromatic solfège syllables and incorporate this exercise into the

warm-up routine.

After warm-ups, begin the rehearsal with something familiar in order to have students experience success immediately. Next, move on to new material. Develop strategies to teach each component of the piece and be prepared to break down difficult passages. Throughout the rehearsal, make sure the students have opportunities to feel successful. Toward the end of the rehearsal, try to provide some relief by rehearsing a piece students can sing with ease or review something they have accomplished. You want the students to leave your room singing the repertoire from the class; this can be one of the best advertising tools for your program.

Questioning and discussion can be a great rehearsal strategy to engage students in their own learning. For example, you can ask students, "What did we work on at the last rehearsal?" "How can we improve that phrase?" "How might we solve this musical challenge?" "What do you think we need to work on?" Ask students to review their own rehearsals and performances and the performances of others. These reviews can be in the form of a written prompt or in class discussion. A class discussion allows bold students to share their opinions, whereas a written prompt encourages all students to share. In addition to the benefits in the classroom, questioning and discussion techniques are frequently included as a category in teacher evaluations.

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**Philip Silvey**

One of the most important skills you will need to develop as a teacher is the ability to motivate your students. You can increase the likelihood that your students will want to do something by creating the right conditions where they will be more motivated to participate,



# ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR CHORAL TEACHER

learn, and excel. But it gets even more complicated when you realize you may need to do more than just inspire disengaged learners. You may have obstinate or contrary students or even classes that include students who are required to attend but do not wish to be there and do not think they can sing.

We want our students to apply their best effort by their own choice, doing so because they want to learn and succeed. We can help this occur by 1) only asking students to do meaningful work—that is, work that has recognizable value to them and their future; 2) encouraging autonomy or ownership by teaching students transferrable skills and providing opportunities for them to put these skills into practice (i.e., allowing students to be responsible for their own learning and progress); and 3) reinforcing student efforts by praising the inherent value of the improvement (rather than complimenting the student for complying or pleasing you, highlight how the action is beneficial to the student). Students want to be part of something excellent, but they also need space to try and fail, to think about their own learning, and to formulate their own ideas. The best way to engage students is to ask questions, allow time for them to talk, and keep them active.

For rehearsals, some say the attention span of the learner, calculated in minutes, correlates with the students' age in years (i.e., a class of seven-year-olds needs to change activities every seven minutes). Keep the rehearsal pace brisk, with a general sense of urgency, changing positions (sitting to standing), rotating repertoire (two or three pieces per hour of rehearsal), and keeping the students as active as possible (minimize teacher talk through nonverbal cues and word directives or questions concisely).

*Editor's note: ChorTeach volume 7, no. 2, contains an article on the topic of classroom management that might be of*

*interest to readers: "Communicating with Parents—Help for Music Teachers" by Susan Dill. ChorTeach is available online at: <http://acda.org/page.asp?page=chorteach>*

## QUESTION #3:

### Balance

**How do I balance my personal life and the stress of a new job?**

**How do I balance the roles of educator and musician?**



**Elizabeth Batey**

Balancing the personal life and the professional life has been the hardest part of my career. I think having children makes it even more complicated. Every day when I wake up, I make a choice, and it is not about having it all. I have found through years of trial and error that I need my family at times, I need to teach at times, I need to perform at times, I need to meditate at times, I need to rest at times, I need to do nothing at times, and I need to exercise at times. All of these things balance me, and a balanced me is a happy me. Are there times that I drop the ball? Absolutely! I used to take papers home with me to grade on the weekends, but it ruined my weekends, and I took it out on my kids. I finally figured out that the work needed to stay at work. Do I occasionally get behind on my grading? Yes! Does the world end? No!

I think it is important as choral directors that we continue to hone our craft. For about an eight-year span, I stopped singing. I told myself it was because I was too busy with family. I was singing at work with my students, and that was enough. I was wrong. There is a reason I became a choral educator. My voice

is connected to my soul in a way that no one, outside of another singer, can understand. Singing feeds me spiritually in a way that I cannot find anywhere else. Last year, I started singing again with a local auditioned group. Suddenly, I remember why I go to work every day. What we do is so important; we are feeding our students through music. Do not forget to feed yourself.

Finally, when it comes to taking a break, take a break. Enjoy your time off. Do not answer your phone or check your e-mail. If you need a sick day, take it. We are terrible at taking care of ourselves because we know that there is no substitute for us in the classroom. However, if you need a day to recover, is it not worth a day of chaos at school for you to feel rejuvenated? Running yourself into the ground will only make you feel worse and resent your students. In that situation, no one wins.



**Darla Eshelman**

Effectively balancing the dual role of educator and musician depends largely on recognizing each as dependent upon and inseparable from the other. I tell my college students they are essentially earning a "double-major" in both music and education. Functioning at a high-quality level of musicianship is expected from new choral teachers, along with competence in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are critical to the teaching process. This includes application of learning theories, growth, and developmental characteristics of children and teenagers, teaching methodologies, strategies, and daily lesson plans, along with the ever-increasing demand to implement valid assessment techniques. The foundation of an exemplary choral music teacher begins with thorough academic musical knowledge. This must be interwoven with vocal skills worthy



# NOTES FOR SUCCESS (PART 1)

of your students' modeling, piano skills to enhance your teaching, and artistic sensitivity as both a listener and performer. Further, skills such as open score reading, playing one part and singing another, modeling a quality vocal sound, and careful score study should be continually honed. In short, to be effective you must continue to develop a wide variety of musical multitasking. On the other side of the coin, yet directly imbedded in your musicianship, should be a solid grasp of how to communicate all of the above and more as an educator. Stellar performers and knowledgeable musicians do not always go hand in hand with being an effective educator. It will be a unique combination of both musicianship and teaching that builds and sustains a successful program.

Earlier in my teaching, I observed four master teachers whom I had the privilege of studying and writing about for my dissertation. Veteran teacher Sandra Knudson conveyed that both musicianship and educatorship are equally important in the classroom and rehearsal:

"If push comes to shove, I would have to say that I'm a musician first, because in actuality, the teaching did not come first—my musical life came first. I believe that you cannot be an effective music educator without both sides developed.... and there are many people who are good educators and understand working on self-esteem of the students, all those kinds of things, and yet are very mediocre musicians. I don't think that's a partnership we can have. It has to be full musicianship and full educatorship."

A helpful reminder to my continual development as a teacher and a musician is to think about what a mentor conductor would identify as prominent strengths in my choral classroom. I hope they would see that my musical ear is accurate, that I can sing beautifully and correctly, and that if the students make errors, I am able to detect those and not just go on. As a new teacher, it is often difficult to catch every mistake. Consider creative ways to refine these skills such as listening to an array of choirs that can easily be accessed on YouTube. These performances can be productively utilized for practicing choral error detection skills. In addition, take the time to consistently record yourself conducting rehearsals. Utilize this tool to critique and improve your ability for "fine tuning" the choral sound. Effective choral teachers have to be able to hear inaccuracies, pinpoint exactly what needs to be fixed, find a way to communicate that clearly, and motivate the students to make application of what is communicated.



**Elizabeth McFarland**

Make time to care for yourself, especially if you are the primary caregiver in your family or if you are single and live alone. Things like eating healthy, making time to be active, seeing friends and family, and drinking enough water are vitally important. You are a better teacher for your students when you are happy and healthy. Find one way to continue making music where you are not in charge that fulfills your need to be creative. You are worthy of care! Because you are worthy of care, learn to employ the "noble no" when a request won't fit into your school and life schedule. People will learn to respect your forethought and follow-through when you only take on what you can manage.



**Jacob Truby**

While still in college, a recent graduate and teacher returned to speak to our university's student chapter of ACDA to talk about her first year of teaching. Paraphrasing, she said, "If you wanted to work twenty-four hours a day during your first year, you could." This resonated with me, as I can often be one who wants to work until everything is finished. I learned to become comfortable with walking away from a project at the end of the day even if it was not completed. Music teachers have to think about so much all the time: lesson plans for the next day, repertoire selections for next week, field trip logistics for next month, course selections for next year. There will never be a time when everything is completed. The sooner you can be comfortable with this, the easier it will be to take some much needed personal time for yourself.

I have been fortunate enough to live within an hour of my old college

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roommates, also music teachers. During our first year, we made a pact to meet for dinner at least once a month on a Wednesday, right in the middle of the week when, by all accounts, it was probably the least convenient for all of us to get out of town. These dinners together were so incredibly helpful in helping us

stay rejuvenated and excited to teach! We would vent, share ideas, talk about things outside of teaching, and anything else that helped us relax and get ready for the following Thursday.

Finally, find a hobby, something that does not have to do with singing. In so many ways our profession is our hobby;

we choose to lead choirs because of our love for singing. It is devastating to watch music teachers lose that love for singing, and we need to be sure we are as well rounded as our students. This is easier said than done, but extra hobbies or passions outside of singing will go a long way, especially in your first year. 

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