

TEACHING music

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You Are Not Alone!

Tips for New Teachers in Small Schools

The cover story of the August 2023 issue of *Teaching Music*, “Celebrating and Elevating the Small-School Experience,” highlights key benefits of teaching in small schools and strategies for addressing common challenges. This article shares additional insights from a variety of experienced small-school teachers; these tips are specifically focused on supporting teachers during their first few years teaching in small schools. The key overall message is: You are not alone!



KATHI HERNANDEZ

**K-5 Music Teacher
Earlimart, California**

Reach out to your local music education association (MEA). Get involved with professional organizations. Reach out to other local small schools or a small-school representative from your state MEA if they

have one. Network! Don’t reinvent the wheel, and always take time for self-care.



JOE CAMPBELL

**Music Teacher
Nezperce Schools
Nezperce, Idaho**

I teach 160 students across grades K–12. As a new teacher going into a small school, it is important to realize that the traditional modes of music education that can be done

successfully in a larger district just won’t work very well in a district where there are fewer students in the high school than there are parts in a traditional concert band. Don’t waste your time trying to put a square peg in a round hole with these traditional modalities. Instead look for ways to build a music program that serves your community while providing a quality experience for students. Here are some more tips:

- You will be frustrated with how small your budget is, but you probably have the largest budget of any program in the school. Find a way to make it work.

- Small communities value music and the arts, but you must make the music that students are experiencing in their music classrooms relevant to their lived experience.
- Build relationships with community organizations.
- Find ways to define the success of your program that don't rely on competing at festivals invariably skewed toward the larger programs that have the personnel to play the traditional literature.
- Kids in small schools are involved in multiple sports, clubs, and other activities, so you may not get the same level of dedication to your music program as you would in a bigger school where kids are more likely to specialize in one or two things.



LANCE JONES
 Director of Bands
 West Branch Area School District
 Morrisdale, Pennsylvania
 Member of NAfME Small Schools
 Initiative Task Force

Big wins are built on top of several small victories that we need to look for and celebrate on a daily basis. Small-school positions hold opportunities

for wonderful artistic and educational experiences. These positions are more than temporary steppingstones on the way to bigger and better programs. Students in small schools deserve a high-quality music education, and you will find master educators to learn from who are dedicated to the viability of arts education in our rural communities.



DAVID BROWN
 Superintendent of Schools,
 DeRuyter Central School District
 DeRuyter, New York
 Immediate Past President,
 New York State School Music
 Association

I started teaching music in a small district, and the outpouring of love and support was never truly matched by any

other experience. In fact, 25 years later I came back to my first district and am now its superintendent. It had that kind of impact on me. Large or small school, you need to be prepared and know that your impact is as real in a small school as it would be in a larger school, and in some ways, even more impactful.



SHANE COLQUHOUN
 Assistant Professor of Music
 Technology and Contemporary
 Music Styles
 Alabama State University
 Montgomery, Alabama

I taught for 14 years at Loachapoka High School, a small rural school located seven miles outside of Auburn, Alabama. The student

population was 224 students in grades 7–12, with 83% of the population being African American, 15% Hispanic, and 2% Caucasian. It is a Title I school, with 94% of the student population receiving free or reduced lunch.

My advice for new teachers in small schools is:

- Embrace your situation and accept it for what it is. Some of us will have to separate our lived experience from our teaching experience, which can sometimes be nerve-racking, but it is well worth it. When I started, only seven kids participated in the band. When I left, there were 57 band students. We routinely maintained about 25% of the school population in the band. In addition to the marching band, we also had a concert band, a pop ensemble, and a music technology club. One of my favorite sayings was “small band, BIG program.”
- Take the time to embrace the individual musicianship of every student. At a small school, you have an excellent opportunity to be culturally relevant, student-centered, and meet every student where they are. Embrace it! Music education should not be one-size-fits-all. During my tenure, 14 students received university music scholarships.
- Flex scores (specifically for a band) are outstanding. Use them to your advantage. Also, arranging is one of the most necessary skills at a small school. Pick music and write music that fits your ensemble. Under my direction, the band received more than 40 Superior ratings and best-in-class awards at various marching-band competitions throughout Alabama and Georgia and won the Grand Championship at the 2019 Anniston Marching Band Competition despite being the smallest band participating.
- Be a part of the community. In addition to being the band director, I also coached boys' basketball and was the varsity coach for the last four years of my tenure. Very odd pairing, but it allowed me to connect and recruit students on a different level.

Teaching at Loachapoka High School has been one of my best career experiences. I learned how to teach there and connect with students where they are, and it helped me stretch myself as an educator. I am the educator I am today because of my experience there.



JAMES M. REDDAN

Assistant Professor of Music Education,
Central Washington University
Ellensburg, Washington

My first tip is: Listen to your students. Find out what they enjoy and why they enjoy music. Use that to inform your curriculum and practice. Here are some additional ideas:

- Communicate with your administrators. Invite them into your classroom to see what students are doing and learning.
- Find ways to collaborate with your feeder programs. If you are your own feeder program, plan ways for those programs to collaborate and perform together.
- Network, network, network. Others will be facing similar challenges. Ensure you stay part of the larger conversation within your district, state, and region.
- Be active in your community. Communities enjoy seeing what students are doing and learning.
- Make what you do relevant for your students and community to inspire lifelong learning, music-making, music appreciation, and music consumerism.
- Be willing to think outside of the box. There is no “one-size-fits-all” in education. Each population and each student are unique and have something important to offer the world.
- Find out who your biggest advocates are in your school and community, and tap into their resources and knowledge.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help!
- Be yourself.
- Clear communication is one of your best allies. Make sure that you are very clear about what you need and expect and share the dates for your deadlines/performances well in advance.
- Remember that just as your students are learning, take the opportunity to learn from your students and community.
- Make music every day, regardless of how good or bad the day might be.
- Attend every faculty and school board meeting that you can. Stay informed as to what is happening in your school and district, especially about funding and curriculum.



BRETT KEITH

Choral and General Music
Teacher

Northern Bedford County High
School and Middle School
Loysburg, Pennsylvania
President-Elect, Pennsylvania
Music Educators Association

Value everyone in your program. Be that culture of support. In my general music classes, we

build relationships and share our successes, failures, and growth. Through this, students feel safe to fully participate and realize their potential.

Each year, our ensembles and activities grow in confidence and in numbers. Community and cultural support are so important. It’s all in the process of painting the big picture. Don’t be discouraged; frustrations may occur, but from the challenges arise growth and possibilities. Be the person they recognize and come to. In a smaller setting, you have the best opportunity to make a big impact. Most important, be present and always advocate for your students.



WAYNE MILLET

Executive Director
Idaho Music Educators
Association

I taught for more than 32 years in a small rural school after having taught for several years in a much larger school. I found that in the smaller school, my associations with the students and the growth that I saw in

them during the seven years that I taught them was much more rewarding and satisfying professionally than those in the larger school. There were frustrations to be sure, but overall, I feel that the musical experience I gave them enriched their lives in a way that they probably wouldn’t have had otherwise. Here are a few tips for new teachers in small schools:

- Don’t stress about what you don’t have in terms of equipment or talent. Be positive and take stock of what you do have — and be creative using it.
- Be best friends with the registrar. Students will have very limited elective options. You will need to advocate so you have as few conflicts as possible.
- Your second-best friends are the athletic director and coaches. Small-school students are involved in most sports. Be proactive about conflicts. Sometimes you give in, sometimes they give in.



- Be aware of your students' musical limitations. Program pieces that they can be successful at, but also don't be afraid to challenge your ensembles — that is where the real growth comes. Every year, all my high school band students recorded their playing for the All-State auditions, even though 98% of them couldn't get through the études. Each year, they would get a little better at it. The number of students who actually submitted the audition grew each year.
- Don't be afraid to be creative in rearranging the music. The festival judge may not like it, but if it helps the students feel successful and sound better, go for it.
- Keep learning! Go to conferences, visit other teachers in similar situations, and be involved in your state music educators/education association. Most of the great ideas that I came up with should be credited to others who shared their knowledge.



RACHEL LAKE
Music Director
Ilwaco High School
Ilwaco, Washington

I have had several successes at my small school. Coming out of the COVID pandemic, my class numbers are huge due to home visits at least once a month checking on each student. They

felt valued and needed. Another success is having so many students (seven currently) continuing in music at college and majoring in music education. My advice for future teachers is to get to know your town and school values before changing anything! Also, not all battles are worth the fight. Compromise is key.



KAREN GIBBS
K-12 music educator (retired)
Douglas County, Oregon

To connect with high school kids in a multi-level setting, you must be available during a time when they are free — lunchtime, breaks, or before school. Students need to be able to network with you, but they can't

do that in the middle of your kindergarten music class.

Be aware that high school students in small schools “do everything.” I found the sweet spot is to schedule our annual musical the week between the end of football and the beginning of boys' basketball. My elementary mantra was “no program after Tax Day,” which made for far fewer headaches caused by conflicts with spring soccer and baseball.

Know your kids and their strengths before you spend your limited budget on music. Dream all you wish, but wait to see the whites of their eyes before you blow your budget. Capitalize on your student's strengths, not on what you wish they were.

Communicate well with other teachers, the custodian, the maintenance staff, and the bus driver about schedules. Being blindsided is no fun no matter where one's responsibilities lie.

Small-school teachers are miracle workers who must know how to showcase their student's strengths and embrace and develop a years-long commitment to families and their communities. The best teachers do not look at teaching in a small school as a steppingstone to a “real” job. They actively seek to expand their skills, as most teach not only at multiple levels, but are also expected to have expertise in band, choral, and elementary pedagogy.

The most successful teachers look for mentors and colleagues to collaborate with, since they have no teaching partner in their district. Reach out to retired music teachers in the area. I have mentored several instrumentally trained teachers who suddenly found themselves teaching high school choir or elementary music.

Choose one area a year in which to actively seek to improve your skills and look for workshops to attend.



MYRON MASSEY
Band Director
Bunker Hill High School
Claremont, North Carolina

Making a genuine investment in the students and the community has helped my program to grow to large numbers and achieve a strong ability level pretty quickly. You may have to borrow

instruments or other kinds of equipment sometimes, but once your authenticity is felt, the program will have longevity.

I have loved every part of being at my school. If you make your presence known, are genuine in your approach, and work as hard as you can, your program will be just as healthy as schools with a lot more resources. It is possible to do a lot at a small school: You just have to be creative.



MELISSA JMAEFF

**Band and Choir Music Teacher
Sutherlin Middle School and
Sutherlin High School
Sutherlin, Oregon**

Honestly, any day that I've got kids showing up to class, being their best selves, and enthusiastically learning and making great music is a success story to me!

When I first started teaching for a small school district in Oregon, I was extremely overwhelmed. I was thankful to have my husband (also a first-year music teacher at the time) to talk to, as well as local colleagues whom I got to know through our district music education association. As time went by, I developed close relationships with veteran teachers — both in music and in other subject areas — and that really helped me keep my feet on the ground and start to understand the long game. As a transplant to the area, I discovered that making friends with local musicians and other folks also helped me to better understand and connect with the community. During those tough first years, I was also careful to prioritize my own music outside of work. I performed regularly. I attended shows. This went a long way toward ensuring some semblance of work-life balance as well as ensuring that I stayed engaged in my own art.

Do what you can to prioritize your mental health. While being a new teacher in a small school often feels like the work is never done, recognize that taking a break from it is absolutely necessary, and connecting or reconnecting with your own art and the things that mattered to you before you became Ms. or Mr. So-and-So is just as important as the job itself.

Teaching in small schools has given me so many opportunities to fast-track my growth and make me the teacher that I am today.



LAURA EBERHARDT

**Band Director (6th–12th grade)
Cimarron Municipal Schools
Cimarron and Eagle Nest, New Mexico**

I hold a yearly two-day Band Bootcamp and bring in about eight other music educators for two days who do sectionals with my students to help them prepare their contest music.

This provides a valuable opportunity for my students and is great professional development and social time for me. It helps alleviate the isolation problem.

If you come to a small school as someone who did not grow up in the area, it is vital to ask questions and learn about the community before making assumptions. Don't engage in gossip. Go to the local restaurants and grocery stores. Attend the basketball games and track meets. It can be hard to always be "on" when you're out in public, but always be ready to talk to a parent, colleague, or the local newspaper. Try to become a member of the community as soon as possible.

The sense of community can be very moving. We had a big forest fire in our area in 2022. School was shut down the day before our State Band Contest so families could evacuate. I spent the day helping colleagues pack and fully expecting our trip to be canceled the next day. However, during a personal conversation with the superintendent, he asked if I could bring a viable group. About half of my students had evacuated, but after phone calls to every member of the band, all but one student was able to attend the performance the next day, which was three hours away. This was even though many of them were an hour or two out of town already and with many of them worried they might lose their homes. The way the community was behind the band and wanted to make music even in adversity was incredibly meaningful to me. Many tears were shed that day.



NATASHA VERHULST (Nekānekapowiahkiw)

**General Music Teacher
Keshena Primary School —
Menominee Indian School District
Keshena, Menominee
Reservation, Wisconsin**

My advice for new teachers starting a job at a small school is to get out in the community to meet the families, learn the

traditions and cultures of the community, and attend events that celebrate your students. Making connections is what makes our job meaningful, and this is a great place to start. Also, develop a good relationship with others in your building, including the other specials teachers.



DAVID ROWLEY
**K–12 Music Teacher and
Drama Coach
Prescott School
Prescott, Washington**

Build relationships with all students, not just the music kids. Learn everyone's name, and call students by name. Volunteer (but keep personal boundaries) for things that



students are involved in other than music. I have been a line judge for volleyball games, run the scoreboard for basketball and football games, and been an announcer for sports and schoolwide events. I greet all our students as they get off the bus each day. This kind of thing has a major impact.

Pick quality literature that is at the appropriate level for your students. Grade 1 and 2 music even for high school groups is completely acceptable to make your ensembles sound their best. Quality over quantity. If your students feel good about their accomplishments when working on good music that they believe they sound good on, you've won the most important battle. Don't worry about students who don't stick with you. If you have students who don't have a lot of talent but really want to "do music," keep working with them. They will become some of the strongest students you have. I always tell students, "I will keep believing in you until you start believing in you." Those kinds of messages are so important, especially in the post-COVID learning environment in rural America.

Take care of yourself. Mental health problems will sneak up on you if you aren't vigilant. Believe in yourself but ask for help. Keep boundaries but remember everyone's boundaries are different. Just because something works for one person doesn't mean it will work for everyone.



MICHAEL BRANT

Music Teacher
Zillah School District
Zillah, Washington

The best advice I can give is to persistently reach out to colleagues in your area to learn what works well in smaller-school settings. It's also valuable to reach out to

fellow teachers in your school and collaborate on joint cross-curricular projects that can enhance lessons taught throughout the school. Connecting with community members to learn the history of your community and region can lead to music projects specifically designed for your local area.



MARYANN FOLTZ

Elementary General Music, Director of Elementary, Middle, and High School Choirs, and Director of Fine Arts
SouthLake Christian Academy
Huntersville, North Carolina

Sometimes we equate career success with big schools, names, and numbers, but I would offer

that we make as much — if not greater — impact on the lives of our students in small schools. To me, that's the great career success!



KIMBERLY G. KNIGHTON

Music Teacher
Radium Springs Middle School
Albany, Georgia

Network with area rural band directors. Connect with the music faculty at your local institution of higher learning. They can be very resourceful. Also, connect and participate with local church ministries.

They can be another great resource. You are not alone. Last, become a member of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) and attend your state meetings. They provide great networking opportunities.



KIMBERLY LORENZO

4-12 Orchestra and 7-12 Choir
Music Teacher
Anaconda, Montana
President, Montana Music Educators Association

Remember that you are creating an opportunity for your students that they otherwise may not have. Teaching in a small school is the most

challenging job you will accept, but it is also the most rewarding job you will have!



RICH TENGOWSKI

President, NAFME's North Central Division
Chair, NAFME Small Schools Initiative Task Force

I recently retired after teaching in a small school my entire career. I am a small school music teacher and proud of it! You are not alone. NAFME's Small Schools Initiative Task

Force is here to connect, serve, and unite small school music teachers. ☰



Ashlee Wilcox
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This story was compiled by John Donaldson, NAFME's assistant director for professional development and publications and staff liaison to NAFME's Small Schools Initiative Task Force.