

## TOP TEN THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN BEFORE I STARTED TEACHING

Clark Sheldon  
Barrington High School  
Barrington, IL  
[csheldon@cusd220.org](mailto:csheldon@cusd220.org)

When the idealism of a first-year teacher collides with the reality of a classroom, there often are a lot of things that catch new teachers by surprise, and that veteran teachers accept as part of the job. If a new teacher can know what to expect, and have some tools to change the reality so it is closer to their expectations, a great deal of pain can be avoided. These tips are arranged with those two goals in mind. Keep in mind, however, that no experience can prepare you for taking responsibility for a class for a year, much less heading a program. Hopefully, these tips will point you in the right direction.

Knowing what to expect:

Know as much about the job as you can to minimize surprises and unmet expectations.

- What is the community like?
- What was the teacher like that you are following?
- What is the school schedule?
- How often will you see your students and for what amount of time?
- Be willing to alter your teaching style to better serve your clientele.

Most students don't sign up for a music class to be inspired or to be part of something profound (reasons often cited by music teachers for going into music).

- Not all students will naturally want to be the best musician they can be.
- Tapping into the reasons that students are in your class (fun, friends, forced) can help you relate to their situation.

The more you care, the harder your job is.

- Good intentions are not enough.
- Know and have in mind how you want to be treated by students and colleagues so you don't get hurt.
- Be prepared, because your students (and colleagues) will take advantage of you to the extent that you allow them.

Be prepared to be the only advocate for yourself.

- The school environment is a competitive one - you'll need to look out for yourself.
- Building interpersonal connections with staff in your building(s) is critical.

Beware the power of mediocrity.

- In others - what you do may make others feel threatened.
- In yourself - resist negative people, don't give up.

Bringing reality in line with your expectations:

Nearly every success you have stems from control in the classroom.

- Classroom management is more of a teaching issue than a behavioral issue.
- "If you want to keep students' attention, you have to put something in it."
- My students aren't in music to listen to me talk.
- Not all kids learn the way I do.
- If a student is going to learn something new, they need to know why.
- Successful teaching is more about relating to people than music.

The teacher is the catalyst.

- Don't expect anything from your group that you don't teach them.
- In many situations, you are the only music experience they have.
- Don't rely on private teaching or extra programs to teach your kids.

Know how to teach the instrument(s)!

- Confidence goes a long way in a classroom.
- If you want your groups to improve, you have to teach them their instrument both in rehearsals and in lessons, if you have them.
- You have to tell students everything!

Telling a student something once is not teaching.

- They need to hear things over and over and over...
- Performance is their indication of content learned.

The literature you select is one of the single most important contributors to the success of your performance.

- Tailor the selections to the group you have, not the ensemble you wish you had, i.e. - Don't over program.
- Know the student literature, not only the music you have performed.

Be willing to be unpopular.

- Teaching is the job you were hired to do.
- Many teachers who try to be a student's friend as a teacher end up being neither.
- Teachers who care about their students make sure they learn.

**NETWORK!**

- Get connected professionally - this is vital to your survival and growth.
- There are other teachers out there who have similar experiences, and are willing to help and share and listen.
- Observing as many teachers as possible is a very valuable experience.

The long term: Some things just take time. Music teachers are unique in the school world - we have to build a program where students participate for many years. Students and parents get used to you. Expectations become engrained into a program, and you don't have to do everything for the first time every year.