Are you teaching teachers?

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Are You Teaching Teachers?

By David A. Rickels, Boise State University

As music teachers, we can each probably remember that moment as a student when we were in a music class and realized that music education was going to be our career. We can most likely recall the teachers that helped us make that connection between our enjoyment of music and our potential as future teachers. Now, years later, we are standing in our own classrooms, passing on musical knowledge to students not very different from ourselves at that age. Our own experience dictates that we cannot ignore the crucial responsibility we hold at this time. We must not only educate, but also engage the next generation of music teachers. We must teach as though we are teaching teachers.

Research on music teacher recruitment repeatedly points to the K-12 music teacher as the greatest influence on students deciding to pursue careers in music education. One recent study reported that 93% of students entering college music auditions for music education majors cited a music teacher in high school as influential, while 35% cited a junior high music teacher.

While these data are encouraging, they do not tell the whole story when it comes to the teacher’s overt role in encouraging these students’ choices. Only 59% of students claimed their high school band, orchestra, or choir teachers had spoken to them about careers in music education, and approximately 24% claimed such conversations with their junior high music teachers. Clearly there is more we can do to place music education career considerations directly in the hands of K-12 students. Simply speaking to more students about becoming music teachers may go a long way toward planting the seeds that can blossom into future educators.

Taking a mindset of teaching future teachers can also change the way in which we design instruction. If we are to think of our students as future teachers, we must teach within a broad model that treats every student as one who may potentially pass that instruction on to others. This model demands that we educate students not simply as repeaters of skills, but as complete and independent musicians.

Much of the research above also points to the value of experiences where K-12 students have the opportunity to engage in teaching roles, such as leading groups or teaching lessons. While some students will inevitably grow into greater levels of participation and skill that dispose them toward readiness for music careers, all students would benefit from a classroom environment that asks them to take ownership of the material to a level that could someday allow them to teach.

The classroom environment and influence of a music teacher can occur at any grade level. In the study noted above, over half the students claimed to have made the decision to major in music education prior to their sophomore and junior year of high school, with some pointing to this decision occurring as early as elementary school. It appears that it is never too early to start spreading the message about careers in music education. Every music teacher of every grade level and specialty should share in the twofold responsibility of averting sharing with students the possibility of a career in music education, while simultaneously establishing a classroom environment that enables students to build skills and knowledge they can someday pass on.

Regardless of whether many or few of our personal students in K-12 choose to pursue music education careers, we must all take responsibility for some part of that decision process. We as music educators must make the development of potential music teachers into part of our lesson plan. How are you preparing your students to take the baton, both figuratively and literally? Ask yourself, are you teaching teachers?

Recommended reading:

Building the John William Jackson Fund: A Passion for Life, Plus Hard Work

Can half a dozen people, none of them wealthy, raise more than $200,000 in eight years? Just ask the founders of the John William Jackson Fund, who have done exactly that.

“We’re a fledgling organization, and we have only about six really active volunteers,” said Bill “Action” Jackson, the Boise man who created the fund in memory of his son who was killed in a rock climbing accident in 2000. “We have to work harder and smarter to accomplish our goals.” Jackson and his wife, Jackie, established the fund in the Idaho Community Foundation after their son, then 24, was killed in a rock climbing accident in Central Asia. A graduate of Centennial High School and Georgetown University, John was conducting research in the field of neuropsychology at the University of Montana.

The fund’s goal is to help Idaho youth pursue John’s varied interests, which ranged from education and music to sports, including rock climbing and mountain climbing. Passion for life and hard work were trademarks of John, just as they are of his family and the fund. “We know that we can’t just lend letters and hope that donations will come,” Jackson said. “We have to follow up with everyone we contact, and fill them in on what the fund is doing. Even though our grants go to Idaho programs, we reach out to people across the nation and around the world.”

Today the fund provides opportunities for children in elementary and middle school to hear the Boise Philharmonic’s Verge Percussion Group, provides scholarships to a summer music camp at Boise State University, purchases musical instruments for use by children in less affluent communities, provides academic scholarships, and funds outdoor sporting activities for youth. Grants the year totaled $35,000, in addition to the $88,000 in grants from previous years. Two years ago, the fund started a new program with Pacific Recycling. The firm, based in Great Falls, Montana, is one of the largest scrap metal operations in the Treasure Valley. The new venture, called the Idaho Youth Education Recycling Partnership, works with 50 companies. Volunteers collect recyclables, ranging from plastic bottles and aluminum cans to scrap steel, from construction sites and local businesses. The first year the partnership raised $2,406 by collecting 1,200 pounds of scrap aluminum and 44.555 pounds of other scrap metals. Last year the total came to $11,434 from 199,313 pounds of materials, and the Jackson Fund ranked No. 20 on Pacific Recycling’s list of scrap metal sellers.

This is a win-win situation, Jackson noted. It is rarely financially feasible for a single construction site to have a recycling program, he said, but the totals are significant. “Our motto is, ‘We scrap for Idaho youth—remember, reframe, recycle, repeat relentless’,” he said. Jackson turned to the Idaho Community Foundation when he and Jackie started the fund. “We looked at what it would take to start a standalone foundation, he said, “and we realized very quickly the cost and time that would be involved. It’s been very good to work with ICF. Everyone is always willing to help us when we come up with an idea that hasn’t been tried before. We have a good one-on-one relationship, and I drop in to talk at least once a week.”

A graduate of Boston University, Jackson got the nickname “Action” while he served in Vietnam, where he met his wife, Jackie. After spending 27 years working around the world for Motrin Knudsen, he became a car salesmen for Lyle Pearson in Boise. He also is a former chair of the Idaho Commission on the Arts. Other volunteers include Fund President Ben Blaine, one of John’s childhood friends and an engineer at Weyerhaeuser. He remembers that John persuaded him to go to college. “John expected people to do their best,” Ben said. “I wouldn’t be where I am today had it not been for John.” And, like “Action” Jackson, he tells everyone he meets about the fund, which he said definitely can use a few more volunteers.

“Remember, somebody helped you.” Jackson always says. “Once you get established, look back and see who you can pull along.”

More information is available at www.johnwilliamjacksonfund.org. For information on how to donate scrap metal for recycling, call (208) 899-8503 or send an e-mail to jwjfund@gmail.com. Last year, school districts of Caldwell, Kimberly, Meridian, Parma, Pocatello and Wendell will be awarded $1,000 each to purchase musical instruments. Below are pictured some of the recipients.