

MANAGED to a Moment

▶ Success in the
Elementary
Music Classroom

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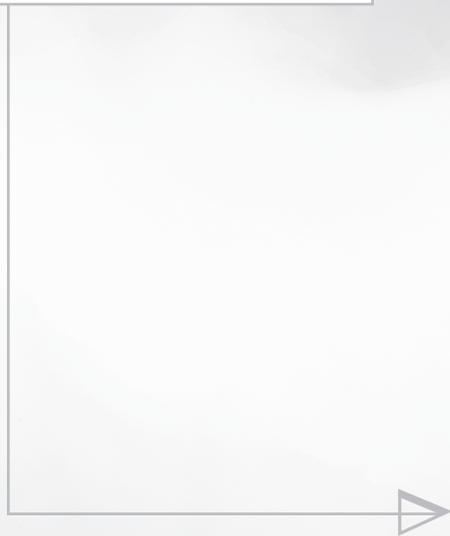




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Managing People



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Managing Yourself

Kim is in her first year back after four years off as a stay-at-home mom. She is starting at a new school in a new city. She is excited to be around adults again and is secretly relieved to be sending her challenging four-year-old to preschool where someone else can deal with his high anxiety and hyperactivity for a few hours a day. Every morning, she pries her two-year-old off herself and hands her to a sweet woman who holds her tight while she screams for her mommy. She must race to day care after school to pick the kids up and then, as often as not, is fully responsible for the kids' play time, dinner time, bath time, and bed time because her husband often travels for work and they don't have family in their new town. Then she settles down to get lessons ready for the next day. It is exhausting to work full-time while parenting, but it is also exciting to be back to work. That is, until her daughter gets an ear infection, her son's school calls because he is hiding behind a filing cabinet, and her husband extends his business trip by three days. Then, it's all more than she can take and she is losing it at home and at work.

Teaching music is a really hard job. You must teach students of a wide range of ages, personalities, and abilities; you have little to no curriculum; and your time is compressed. Even the other teachers in your own building may not realize what you face.

And the best teacher in the world will struggle when things are falling apart at home. Sick kids, relationship struggles, financial concerns, and exhaustion can make our difficult job even harder. Finding ways to manage your work life so that it is more rewarding and less exhausting is important, especially in the challenging times.



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Managing Kids

Our own behavior is, quite literally, the mirror for how our students will behave. When you are tired and cranky, you will not be at your best in the classroom. And those are the days when the kids seem most difficult. This is not a coincidence. Kids read our body language, tone of voice, and temperament and feed off it. If you are giving off negative vibes, they are going to ripple back to you like the proverbial stone tossed in a pond. When you are struggling with kids' behavior, take a moment to check yourself. Are you exuding sincere positivity? Are you focused on what the kids are doing right or what they are doing wrong?

That said, there will definitely be the day when Cristian is under your chair, Oscar just wiped his nose on your pants, Veronique is running up and down the risers because she has a hole in her pants, and Octavio holds out a handful of puke. Ridiculous things will happen. Maybe not those specific things that happened to me, but things will happen and you'll want to react. It can be very easy to get your dander up and demand that everyone behave themselves.

The reality is that you cannot control others, but you must always control yourself. When the kids get the best of you, take a deep breath, shake it off, and start again.

Managing kids is the core of what good teachers do day in and day out. You can be the best musician in town with an amazing array of fantastic musical activities ready to go, but if you can't manage the kids, none of that will matter. In fact, I would argue that if you don't *love* the kids, with all their nose-picking,

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Managing Adults

While the children outnumber the adults in a school, the adults—administrators, parents, colleagues, and student teachers—are a huge part of the equation. The bad news is adults can be much more difficult to manage than kids. They tend to have an agenda, often have preconceived notions of what they want, and they are much more experienced at manipulation. Overcoming these challenges is worth it, though, because if you can keep your adult relationships working smoothly, your life will be much easier.

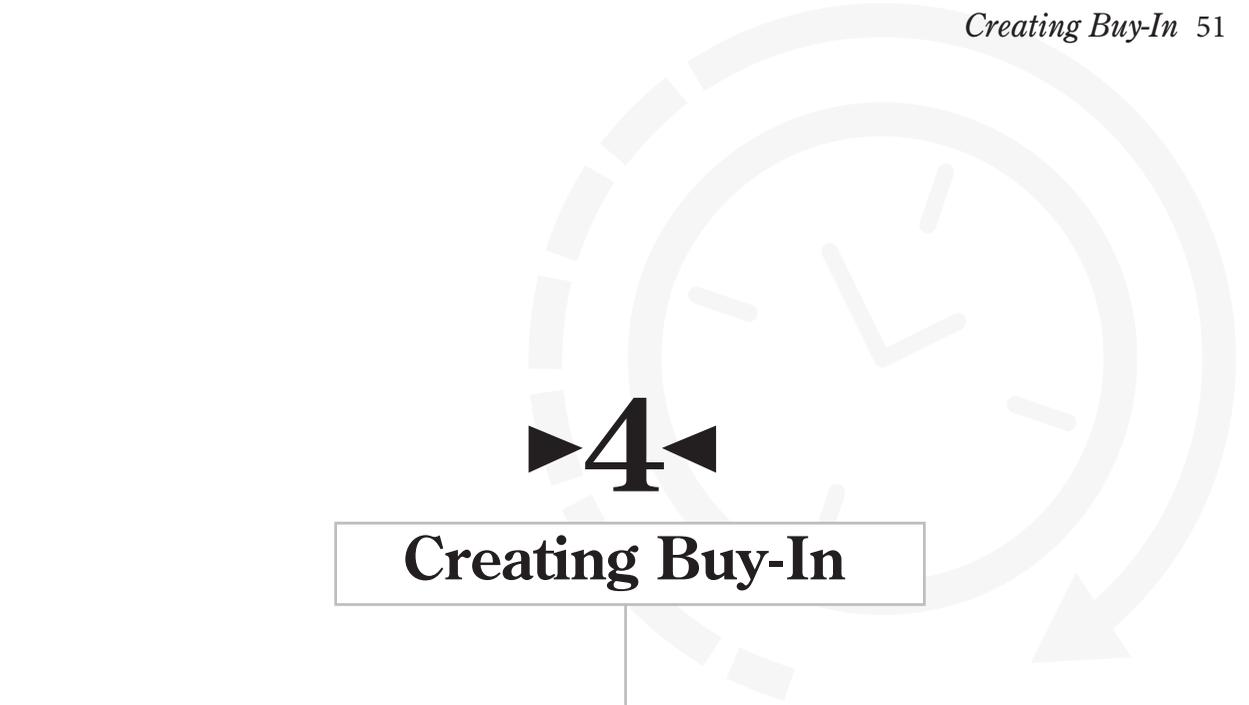
Administration

I've had the good, the bad, and the ugly, behaviorally speaking. I've had principals who lead with confidence and humility and the other ones—the ones who got their admin licenses because they couldn't stand actually teaching. I've had principals who would never ask me to do something they weren't willing and able to do themselves and the other ones—the ones who wouldn't dream of wiping a nose or tying a shoe or solving a problem without creating a bigger one in its wake.

Most administrators are good people. If your district runs things right, your principal was an excellent teacher and they will inspire you to be your best. They genuinely want you to be successful and to see every child thrive. I have that principal right now and I can't say enough about how it changes the school for the better. But, I've had the other kind, too. So, this advice comes from the heart and I hope it helps. I suppose it is as true with my excellent principal as it is with the other kind.

Managing Curriculum





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Creating Buy-In

Imran and Joseph. They were the ring leaders of the fifth-grade boys when I started at my current school fifteen years ago. I heard about them in staff meetings before I ever met them. They were loud, rude, and belligerent. They incited the other kids to rebellion. I tried everything I could to get them to buy in to music class, but they sabotaged every lesson one way or another. They got under my skin and they knew it and they used it to drag everyone down.

There have been many Josephs and Imrans in the years since and I have gotten much better at getting them to buy in to music. Sometimes it's the only class they do buy into.

Creating buy-in is something you will need to do over and over throughout your career, but never more than at the beginning of your career or at a new school. If you are following a much-loved teacher, you have to get the entire community to believe that there are many paths to the same goal. If you are following a less-loved teacher, you will have to get the community to buy into music as a positive part of the day. If you are bringing music to the school for the first time, you have to get the community to believe in music as a valid part of the day. Community is not just kids, but staff and families, too.

The best advice I have gotten, and can offer, is to meet the kids where they are and bring them to where you want them to be slowly, methodically, and with as much sincere positivity as you can muster.

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Getting Down to It: Creating Your Plan



Singing, reading, playing, and moving—that’s what our “what” is built around. Regardless of your strengths and weaknesses, learning community, standards, or philosophy, at some point, you need to dive in and sing, read, play, and move.

Singing

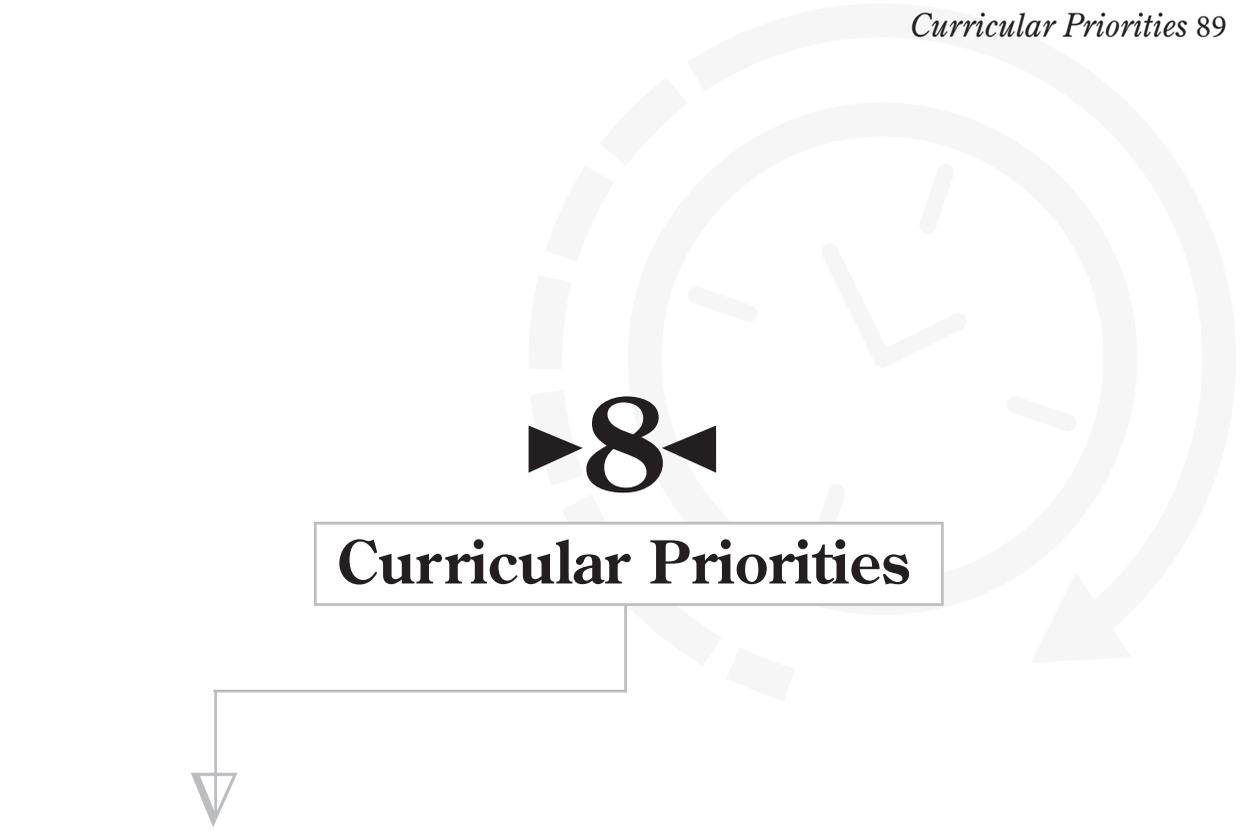
Singing is the root of musicianship. If you cannot, will not, or do not sing, your musicianship will never fully develop. (And that’s coming from a percussionist and drummer who was a very hesitant singer.) Unfortunately, we, as a culture and society, have let our students believe that singing is embarrassing. As the music teacher in your school, it is completely up to you to change that assumption. You must normalize singing so that it becomes something kids (and adults) in your school do without hesitation or question.

This takes time: not days or weeks or months, but years. If you are new to your school, you may face resistance from your older students. If they have minimal singing experience, they will likely be unable to control their voices well and will be unwilling (or even unable) to sing well. Because they fear embarrassment, they may sabotage your efforts to get them to sing. You may have to accept this on some level.

However, you can prevent this issue from continuing in the future by singing to, with, and for your younger students. Make singing a part of every music

How I Manage My Moments





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Curricular Priorities

My fundamental priorities? My kids will leave my school with a love of music, the skills to succeed in their future musical projects, a basic understanding of the variety of ways to be musical, and the confidence to pursue whatever musical pathway interests them.

In order to accomplish these goals, in preschool and kindergarten I focus on the very basic skills of keeping a steady beat and using a singing voice. I do that by introducing a large repertoire of traditional American children's songs, finding the steady beat to songs in a variety of ways, adding instruments to songs, including lots of movement, and singing or reading a story to the kids each day.

In first and second grades, I introduce rhythmic notation and continue to build on the song repertoire, but include more songs in different modes, meters, and moods, and from different cultures. I include lots of unpitched percussion instruments and introduce pitched percussion.

In third, fourth and fifth grades, I introduce singing in harmony through rounds and partner songs, continue to work on rhythmic notation and add melodic notation, and introduce a variety of instruments: recorder to focus on melody, ukulele to focus on chords, drums to focus on rhythm, marimbas to focus on ensemble, and electronic music to focus on composition. My school district also participates in Link Up with the Orchestra, which dictates