



Practice, What YOU Preach!

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor

Another summer has come to an end and those annoying back-to-school ads on television are just another reminder that the cycle has begun anew. The throngs of old and new student faces have arrived and it's time to lay out your vision for the school year ahead. You know the routine. You are prepared and ready to jump into the action. Ah, but not so fast. There are disconnects to address. Let me explain.

As teachers, we are all cognizant of the “do as I do” approach that we use with our students. After all, the visual and auditory nature of being a music educator requires us routinely to model many musical and technical concepts for our kids.

However, it bears noting that there are often conflicting signals and mixed messages (sometimes subliminal in nature) that, like it or not, are being telegraphed to our students. For example, we all understand that a good part of our job is to model concepts like proper playing and singing position (posture), techniques for being a critical listener, responding to visual cues, proper behavior and the list goes on and on. Ah, the challenges of being a music educator. Wait, there's more!

Here are some interesting observations culled from teacher evaluations over the years. Perhaps you'll find something familiar here?

Punctuality: The teacher routinely starts class way too late yet demands that students arrive on time. Teacher ends class beyond the period bell.

Paying attention: Students are admonished that cell phone use is not permitted in class, yet the teacher often ignores this rule. He/she [the teacher] works at a teacher's computer during class time and/or checks his or her own e-mail on a personal cell phone periodically.

Clean-up and putting instruments away (properly): Teacher reminds students that they are to take responsibility for putting away their own class materials (music folders/portfolios/instruments, etc.) yet, the teacher often disregards the clock and runs class to the bitter end when the period bell rings. Students have little or no time to secure items as they do not want to be late to their next class.

No food or drink: Teacher has a no food/drink rule in the music room but is always seen with a large thermal mug and or has a microwave in the rear of the classroom or adjoining office. The smell of freshly microwaved food is common in the music room when students enter the room.

Poor condition of the music classroom/rehearsal space: Teacher demands that students keep the room neat and

tidy yet he/she fails to enforce a student no eating/drinking in the classroom policy. The classroom is often not neat and/or organized when students enter the room.

Non-participatory students: The teacher reminds students that if they come to class unprepared (i.e., without an instrument), they are to bring work to do. Or, when a percussionist is not assigned to play a particular selection in band they are to have “busy” work to occupy their time. The teacher does not provide music-related work so students do their homework in class and/or cram for a test.

I could go on but, let's stop here and reflect. In the end, try as hard as we may, teachers are all subject to the same human foibles as non-teachers. Kids are like “sponges.” They soak up everything and are very astute when it comes to picking up on the “culture” of the school and, more important, the “culture” of your classroom.

Kids routinely (and very accurately, I might add) read into the body language of their teachers. Students pick up on a teacher's appearance, style of dress, changes in hairstyle, mood and a whole host of other nuances that can sometimes be amazingly accurate.

Knowing this, teachers need to remember that our influence just doesn't stop with the quality of instruction. The examples we set, the expectations we demand and the way in which each of us lives up to the same freedom/restrictions placed on students can and will define each of us in and beyond the classroom.

Part of what we inevitably teach kids is that life is sometimes filled with double standards yet, our job as educators is to try to stick to a model that stresses fairness, rules that are reinforced and applied with equal temperament in all situations and with a goal toward positive role modeling both in and out of the classroom.

So, this is a great time to establish all your rules and expectations. Just remember that you need to understand how kids think and respond to what they perceive in the environment you create. Now, practicing what you preach musically-speaking, is another challenge we'll tackle in a future editorial.

Best of luck as you get your year off and running!