

**MSFQ: More to Start. Fewer to Quit.**  
**The S.M.A.R.T. Approach to Music Ensemble Student Retention**  
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Retention starts with our youngest music-makers so it is vital that we focus on keeping them engaged and enthused about music-making once they have begun. By focusing on retention strategies that promote success, provide modeling, keep students actively involved, encourage reflection, and ensure trust, we will greatly increase the chance that students will want to return year after year for another helping of exciting music-making experiences.

I refer to this as the S.M.A.R.T. approach to student retention. These aren't the actual activities you'll plan as part of your retention program, rather they serve as the underpinnings to guide all of your retention efforts.

**S = Success**

Today's young people have so many challenges; the most important thing we can do is to provide our students with successful experiences. They want to feel good about their efforts and what they are accomplishing—as individuals as well as in a group. One place where they can really feel good about themselves is in our music rooms so keep success in mind as you plan your recruitment projects.

**M = Modeling**

Modeling is another approach to keep in mind. Let me explain what I mean.

When I was in elementary school – and even more so when I was in junior high school – I could not wait to meet kids who were older than I was. When older students acknowledged me in some way, it was a big deal simply because they were older!

We need to remember and key-in on this. Most younger kids want to be liked and acknowledged by older students, so find opportunities for high schoolers to inspire – and model success for –their younger peers. This can be extremely powerful and something most directors don't use to full advantage.

What's more, when we ask high school students – or even our older band students in the same building – to participate in some kind of a modeling activity, they really enjoy it! Many students welcome an opportunity to develop their leadership skills through positive modeling.

## **A = Activities**

Of course, one of the most important approaches to the retention of beginners is ensuring that these youngest musicians are actively involved in music-making so scheduling their first concert as early as the sixth or seventh week of school is a must. A performance early on ensures that they will experience success performing music in public in front of an excited and supportive audience of family members. Remember, the point of an early “informance” is to show how much has been learned in a short amount of time as well as generate enthusiasm for performing on the part of the students. Plan to give your beginners successful opportunities to play as early as possible and continue to provide performance experiences throughout the year.

## **R = Reflection**

Another approach that is often neglected is reflection. It is important to use reflection to encourage students to think more often about what making music means to them:

“Being in band has become like being in a family.”

“The band room is the one place in school where I feel like I can be myself.”

We need to prompt them to say what being in an ensemble means to them, and to share their insights not only with students who may wish to join in the future, but also with our current students. Sometimes it helps to be reminded how music-making is making a difference in our lives, because it does.

## **T = Trust**

Dr. LaKimbire Brown from Teach for America put it most succinctly when writing that the purpose of schools is to develop a place where all students learn at high levels and that in order to achieve this, meaningful relationships must be established and an essential component of meaningful relationships is trust. Trust is safety. Trust is comfort. Trust is feeling that someone has your back. Trust is an environment where everyone can perform at their best. When students trust that the music educator has their best interest at heart, both individually and collectively, they will allow themselves to more fully explore and experience the beauty and fulfillment that music-making provides.

In the big picture, we should keep in mind that students want to be involved. Not only do they want to be a part of the music-making, they also want to be a part of the school. They want to be engaged, they want to be recognized for what they're doing, and this is all related to the total picture of what your music program brings to the life of each student. As you review all of your retention ideas and begin to implement your plans, keep the S.M.A.R.T. approach to retention in mind. These will

make your retention activities even more effective. For more ideas, download a free copy of the *Guide to Recruitment and Retention* at [msfq.org/guide](http://msfq.org/guide).

Marcia serves as president of Music Education Consultants, Inc., a consortium of music education professionals which works with a variety of educational organizations, arts associations, and school districts to foster the growth and breadth of standards-based, music education programs. She also serves as Education Advisor to the Music Achievement Council, a 501(c)(6) organization whose purpose is to enable more students to begin and continue in instrumental music programs through effective professional development programs for music educators. In 2016, Neel was named Senior Director of Education for the Band and Orchestral Division of Yamaha Corporation of America and recently accepted a position on the Board of Directors of the Percussive Arts Society.