

How Teachers Can Develop Professionally

By Marcia Neel

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Marcia Neel is a retired music educator and the president of Music Education Consultants in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Every time music educators gather, whether at a national conference or at a local coffee shop, professional development can occur. The common denominator is always communication of ideas and experiences (both good and bad) that result in some sort of learning—generally among all parties involved.

Opportunities for learning exist at many levels. In the words of leadership expert John C. Maxwell, leaders should strive to “be better tomorrow than you are today.” Music teachers certainly fall into this category, and those who are involved in ongoing professional development are living examples of Maxwell’s philosophy.

All school districts should invest in high-quality and effective professional development for the simple reason that it helps students when the teacher is better prepared. In essence, professional development should be thought of as what is best for the student. Depending on the school district, this could take the form of a music-reading session, a conducting workshop, or a motivational session. In all cases, the end result should be a better situation for student learning, as well as a better situation for the teacher through enhanced understanding of the teaching process in some way. In an age when many young music educators leave the classroom in frustration, it’s important to look to professional development to light the way. Good training can reignite the fire that took a teacher into the classroom initially.

We all know the value of taking a couple of days to recharge our batteries through professional development. These opportunities teach us new and innovative ideas to increase student achievement and motivate us to return to our classrooms to try them out for ourselves. We hear exemplary performances that inspire us to do better with our own performing ensembles. No matter what the workshop, conference, or training, participation in meaningful professional development returns us to the classroom as better music educators than when we left.

Because of its inherent value, most school districts provide in-house training of their own. In many states, teachers who take these types of courses can use the hours to recertify their teaching credentials.

What educators learn through excellent professional development has a direct and immediate effect on what happens in the classroom, which is why many schools require their teachers to have a certain number of hours of in-service training, even though it may not always be in the individual teacher’s areas of specialization. In addition to what the school or district offers, teachers need to seek out professional development opportunities on their own. Individual

teachers know best what would help them most, and they need to invest the time, energy, and resources to make this learning a reality.

For more than twenty-five years, I have worked in a district that gives high priority to professional development. The Clark County School District (CCSD), centered in Las Vegas, Nevada, provides this type of training to music educators through myriad methods. I hope that, through this article, I can share some of the most successful practices to assist in getting the ball rolling in regions that may need it. Some of these ideas involve expanded learning at the state, national, and international levels, whereas others may be achieved through local means. Some of these resources are free or low cost, while others require long-term time and material investments by teachers, administrators, and communities. The most important point, however, is that professional development must be instituted where it is currently absent so that music educators can begin their path to improved teaching skills at the very first opportunity.

Online Bulletin Boards

One of the easiest ways to facilitate a professional exchange is to provide a forum where teachers can post and answer questions through technology. MENC's Online Mentoring program is one such system, but many school districts have their own in-house systems that enable teachers to create bulletin boards for a variety of groups and purposes. The CCSD, for example, employs more than five hundred certified music educators and finds it extremely beneficial to provide two large Web sites, one for elementary music educators (grades K–5) and another for secondary music (grades 6–12).

On the Secondary Music "Conference," as one large umbrella CCSD site is called, there are separate bulletin boards for band, choir, orchestra, guitar, mariachi, and even "newbies," to name a few. These larger bulletin board areas each have subject topics on items relating to their specific area. Some examples include districtwide festivals, all-state activities, basic music library information, and staff and substitute information. Also found within each subject area are specific folders that house items such as curriculum documents, purchasing information, and specific listings from the music libraries of other schools within the district. This entire Web system acts as a giant filing cabinet where information can be stored and retrieved when needed. Most important for users, each specific site (e.g., band, choir, orchestra) provides an opportunity for educators to interact with each other on a large number of topics.

Many sections of the site offer areas where teachers can post comments and questions to one another. The program used is called FirstClass Interact, and all 35,000 employees of the CCSD have access to each other through this system. On any given day in the Secondary Music Conference site, one might see postings soliciting colleagues to provide feedback at pre-festival concerts, offering help with classroom management, or even telling a good story. In some cases, teachers are buying or selling personal instruments or seeking collegial input on curriculum, facility, or budget matters.

Districtwide In-Service Training

Each of the individual curricular areas in our music program has what it believes to be separate needs, but some of these are actually quite similar. For example, all music areas have teachers who could benefit from music-reading sessions or conducting clinics, even though these need to

have different formats for the specialized areas of band, choir, or orchestra, or other ensembles such as jazz or mariachi. In many cases, however, the needs of educators in each area are unique, so it's important for those who organize professional development opportunities to work with a team from each of these disciplines to determine what specific professional development sessions are most needed. When music teachers attend an in-service event, they want to be assured ahead of time that it will be a meaningful experience worthy of their valuable time. This is why the onus of determining the specific training provided must be on the key members or leaders of the specific faculty involved.

Our district also offers all its educators what we call Professional Development Education (PDE) courses on a wide variety of topics. Teachers can use credits earned for recertification, and, in most cases, courses are taught by in-house educators who have had success in the given area. Most of these courses are not music-related, but many music educators take them to get additional assistance in more general areas such as classroom management, curriculum mapping, and technology.

Words of Wisdom

Through professional journals, books, and other publications, music teachers can expand their knowledge of the profession. Those who are members of music teacher associations should take time to peruse the organization's catalogs for recent publications of interest. Many such organizations have online resources as well, where members can often read or purchase material directly from the site. MENC has a number of free resources that can help educators keep up with the latest information in many areas, including general music, research, teacher education, technology, advocacy, and others. There are also tools such as lesson plans, relevant links to useful sites, and contact information that can assist teachers in finding what they need. From the National Standards to what's happening on Capitol Hill, www.menc.org can be a great place to start.

Your professional library should include more than books from national associations and university sources. An occasional trip to your local public library can be both inspirational and enlightening if you have specific needs. Don't hesitate to ask a reference librarian for help in your search.

A World of Conferences

Other sources of professional development can be found at local, state, national, and international conferences. These provide time for the teacher to leave the normal environment and focus on new and innovative ways of reaching their students. For teachers of performance classes, one of the most significant forms of professional development is listening to concerts by high-quality ensembles whose makeup is similar to the ones they teach. Very often, this exposure to excellence drives professional development ever further. Teachers want their own ensembles to sound as good as what they have heard, so they will look for conference sessions or specific workshops to learn how to move their own ensembles to the next level.

If you live in the United States, your state will have annual or biennial music education association events, and MENC has a national conference every two years in a different city. MENC also has division conferences in six geographical areas of the United States. These

conferences attract educators and music professionals not only from the region where the event is held, but from many other parts of the country. Clinics, workshops, and a large exhibit hall featuring new music industry products are part of both division and national conferences. International conferences are held for almost every music and education specialty area. Check out the Web sites of other professional associations, such as the American String Teachers Association, the International Association for Jazz Education, Music Teachers National Association, the American Orff-Schulwerk Association, the Dalcroze Society of America, and the Inter-national Society for Music Education, to name a few, for opportunities to participate in their annual events.

Summer Sessions and Workshops

There is nothing like getting away over the summer break to spend a few days in a new location while you focus on new teaching strategies, explore new repertoire, or enjoy a professional exchange. What teachers generally like best about this type of professional development is that it's away from home and thus provides a distraction-free environment. In many cases, teachers use these as minivacations and, depending on the setting, sometimes take their families along as well.

Summer opportunities can be found through surfing the Web, local universities, and such resources as the Summer Study sections of *Teaching Music* (April) and *Music Educators Journal* (May). Ask for references from those who have participated in such programs before signing up and committing substantial time and resources. Many programs have deservedly excellent reputations and will provide exceptional returns on your investment. A week at a fiddling or madrigal camp can change your outlook and inspire you for years to come!

University Courses

Is there a college or university near you with a well-respected music or music education division? Find out what evening and weekend programs are offered for teachers who work full time. With the University of Nevada–Las Vegas in our backyard, there are many opportunities for teachers to take classes; however, it comes as no surprise that during the course of the school year, this method for professional development can be the most difficult. Music educators are usually the busiest teachers in the district, with rehearsals and concerts taking up many of their after-school hours. A workshop-style course often is best, since the time involved is generally concentrated into a two- or three-day period.

Summer can be a better time to take an extended course or workshop, and many such programs are geared specifically toward music teachers. Find out what local institutions offer, and don't forget the possibility of online programs. Although they are often as costly on a per-unit basis as courses taken on campus, they can often offer more flexibility to someone with an already overbooked schedule. In a survey of 250 music educators in our district, the online option wasn't the favorite because of its less personal nature, but for some, distance learning can be an ideal solution.

Personal Mentoring

In addition to workshops, professional development can be provided through mentoring. One such successful experience in my district was bringing renowned string pedagogue Dean Angeles

to work with the orchestra teachers in the CCSD for a full week each year, visiting two or three schools each day and providing immediate feedback to the teacher on a one-to-one basis. The teachers enjoyed this direct approach since it gave them the chance to ask questions as well as plan subsequent exchanges—generally via e-mail. Working directly with recognized experts in this fashion provides teachers with an exceptional opportunity to grow professionally by leaps and bounds in a relatively short time.

A mentor can make a tremendous difference in the life of a music teacher. Not every veteran teacher makes a good mentor, but when you find an experienced teacher who is willing to help, you have uncovered a treasure who can make your job much less stressful and much more rewarding. In addition, it can help teachers reach their potential as music educators more quickly. E-mail is often the best way to communicate, as correspondents can exchange messages at their own convenience.

What Educators Prefer

In preparing to write this article, I thought it might be helpful to survey the secondary music educators of the CCSD on several topics relating to professional development. Responses came from band, choir, orchestra, guitar, and mariachi educators who teach grades 6 through 12, and they revealed some interesting trends concerning their views of professional development. The findings will help shape future delivery of in-service training in our school district, but on a larger scale, may reflect the thinking of today's music educators in general about professional development programs. Teachers were asked a number of questions about their personal preferences on several items and were given the opportunity to write a response. The following paragraphs describe some representative results of the survey.

The teachers surveyed ranged from those who had taught five or fewer years (18 percent of those who participated), to the largest group, those who had taught from eleven to fifteen years (29 percent), to those who had been teaching for more than twenty-five years (5 percent). About three-quarters of the participants had last attended a music education conference in 2006 or 2007.

Below is one question and its response that might help your school system decide what activities might be especially attractive to educators:

What is your preferred delivery of professional development training?

Attending state or national conferences	29%
Attending summer workshops or trainings	24%
Attending District-sponsored in-service training days	24%
Receiving personal mentoring	17%
Attending university courses	3%
Taking online courses	3%

Those who attended state and national conferences appreciated the high-quality, relevant programs offered by guests and performers. They enjoyed meeting and networking with top professionals in their field and seeing and hearing music groups from other locations perform.

Exposure to new repertoire and renowned conductors as well as being able to choose areas where the attendee most needed help were also listed as advantageous.

Several survey participants said that the greatest benefit was “instruction and interaction with other professionals in a setting devoted specifically to our profession.” Another wrote, “I find that ‘side conversations’ and the contacts made at these events make them, by far, the most valuable.” At national conferences and workshops, there is a wide range of sessions and clinicians, and often, in the words of one survey-taker, more chances to interact with “engaged participants who bring ideas that work from all around the country.”

Some teachers, especially those living on a single income, said that their teacher’s salary often limited the number of university-level courses they were able to take, since these courses tend to be costly. A number mentioned limited time, saying that their schedules were already filled and that additional coursework would be “burdensome.” Yet others saw travel to class and “seat time” as drawbacks, and some said that many universities had a weekly structure that didn’t permit the flexibility they needed to complete a course.

The type of professional development that survey-takers found most helpful dealt with pedagogy (34 percent liked this best). Music-reading sessions and workshops devoted to rehearsal techniques were each favored by 18 percent of the participants. Sessions on advocacy, classroom management, conducting, curriculum/assessment, and technology each got the vote of 6 percent of participants as the most helpful professional development. Most (53 percent) preferred participatory presentations or workshops, and almost a third of those surveyed (32 percent) liked workshops with demonstration ensembles or performers. A mere 5 percent like lecture-style events best, although this jumped to 11 percent when a PowerPoint presentation was offered.

The survey also showed that most of the Clark County music educators (77 percent) prefer workshops and conferences where they attend participatory professional development in-services away from their usual setting. Most are looking to find a way to increase their teaching effectiveness, as evidenced by the high number (70 percent) of those who responded that they want pedagogical assistance, rehearsal technique tips, and access to new music through reading sessions. They are drawn to energetic and enthusiastic presenters who are knowledgeable, informative, and engaging through their use of participation with the workshop attendees in the presentation in some way. It is interesting to note that in this time of ever-increasing technology, 69 percent do not like the idea of taking online courses, but 66 percent do prefer to receive handouts via some sort of electronic means.

The survey participants who were disenchanted with online courses often believed that their unique needs were not addressed. They missed the human factor, especially face-to-face discussions and immediate feedback. The interface was sometimes cumbersome. Many disliked spending time in front of a computer, since they had chosen to be educators to deal with real people, not machines. Some mentioned being able to get similar information from professional journals. Those who did have good things to say about online courses mentioned that it was helpful in getting recertified and that such courses forced them to do things quickly.

A survey done in one Nevada school district can't necessarily be generalized to school districts everywhere, but it was helpful to learn what teachers liked and disliked in the way of professional development. Perhaps a survey in your area will reveal similar results, or perhaps you'll be in for some surprises. The best way to find out what people are thinking is to ask their opinions, and even asking such questions can prod teachers in the direction of participating in more professional development activities

Lifelong Learning

It should come as no surprise that the best programs are those taught by music educators who continue to seek out professional development even while they are considered to be at the top of their game. Educators who realize that learning is a lifetime quest always do better. In addition, they are happier because they know they are working at their very best while continuing to have a positive impact on the lives of their students.