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Don't Fret

My Key to a Successful Middle School Orchestra Program

Four years ago, I began using *Don't Fret*, a fingerboard indicator, on the instruments of my students playing violin, viola, and cello. Prior to that, I had been using tape and stickers as do most of my colleagues. The transformation of my program during this time has been remarkable. *Don't Fret* has helped my teaching be more efficient, and the students sound better and have a greater sense of accomplishment. Also, my colleagues have noted the improvement in my results. Below is a description of the experiences we have had using *Don't Fret* in a public school orchestra setting.

Pacific Middle School is located in Vancouver, Washington, and is part of the Evergreen Public School system. The neighborhood is ethnically diverse; students are Caucasian, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Hispanic, and African-American. The school supports a large population of Russian immigrant families, and many of those students participate in orchestra. 47% of the student population at Pacific receives free/reduced lunch, and many students are enrolled as English Language Learners (ELL).

Currently there are 165 students in the orchestra program in grades 6-8. Five classes meet daily for 50-55 minutes each; the smallest class has 26 students, the largest has 54. Approximately 15-20% of the students use a district-provided instrument, and only four students take private lessons. Most come from homes that do not have a parent with orchestra experience. Students may choose to begin orchestra in the 5th grade at their elementary school (two 30-minute classes weekly) or wait to start daily in middle school. 6th grade classes are mixed ability groupings with both beginners and experienced players.

Keeping in mind these demographics, here are my thoughts and findings while using the *Don't Fret* in our orchestra environment:

First Contact: Beginners are always excited to get their first violin, viola, or cello, and putting the *Don't Fret* on their instrument gives me a personal connection with every student at the beginning of the school year. (I also tuck a brightly-colored note to the parent into each case explaining the device.) More importantly, because most young students usually have better visual acuity than aural, the *Don't Fret* provides an immediate reference for finger placement by color. And, I am not kidding, these students love getting something bright, shiny, and new. It looks like a rainbow. It screams fun. It lights up their fingerboard. Their motivation just increased and we haven't played a note.

General Observations: Because they have a concrete reference for the finger placement, my students seem both more accurate and more secure from the beginning. They also seem to develop a sense of right and wrong tuning more quickly. Psychologically, my beginners realize with the application of the product that eventually they will probably be doing something with all those lines up high. 1st position is simply a springboard, I never say other positions are "hard", and I often have kids experiment by playing a passage on a lower string, but starting "on a higher color."

Left Hand Position: With beginners, I have found that more attention can be focused on proper left hand position when students have a visual sense of where all four fingers will be placed. The hand can be more easily shaped, their elbow and thumb can then be aligned correctly, and they have good form from the start. As they become more advanced, I may not always be able to discern by hearing which student is playing an incorrect note in a passage (in a group of 50!), but I can see if a finger is on the red line or the white line four rows away, and I can easily make that adjustment.

Patterns and Interval Relationships: Teaching a skill like the dreaded F#/F-natural or C#/C-natural has been made so much easier by using the *Don't Fret*. Students see how far they must go to change the pitch appropriately. Viola and cello students know they must travel a bigger distance because we compare the *Don't Fret* sizes between instruments. And because the colors are consistent between instruments, I save a lot of time by referring to F# as RED instead of telling violinists/violists to use 2nd finger, then telling cellists to use 3rd. This year my 7th grade orchestra played a combined concert with our band and choir, and they needed to learn the key of B-flat Major. Although I have taught them the key signature, solid note-reading, and half/whole-step relationships, there was a great benefit to defining the shape of the left hand by referring to finger placement: WHITE-WHITE-BLUE-WHITE. Now they have visual road maps for different key signatures on each string.

Shifting: Easy. Pick a color, use a different finger. I can focus more attention on the left hand moving through the shift to its correct placement when students know where to go. And they can easily identify the half-steps and whole-steps when they get into the new position. Just today, a student asked if she could play a particular passage in 4th position! I have not taught it, but she figured if she started with her first finger on the orange line, it was easier. I have found that students will experiment more with the upper positions if they have some idea of where to place their fingers.

The Big Winners: Cellists. Teaching extensions has become so much easier with the Don'tFret; in fact I have enjoyed getting used to hearing F# on the C-string in tune! Also, getting these kids to move their hands into the upper positions without fear has always been a problem. We used to refer to the fingerboard beyond the 4th finger as the "black hole", but the *Don't Fret* has eliminated that dilemma.

The Question of Dependence: There are those who might say I'm developing a reliance on the *Don't Fret* as students will watch where to put their fingers rather than listen for correct pitch. I have found the opposite to be true: the kids more quickly establish a framework for finger placement, take into consideration the smaller intervals as they climb the fingerboard, and they cue into the sound more readily because of it. Additionally, kids are typically watching their music, not their fingerboards, and it's pretty tough to go between the two.

When It's Time to Say Good-bye: My 8th graders, who in their 3 years have learned through 5th position and keys including F and Bb, seem to be ready and willing to leave Don't Fret; indeed some are asking if they could take them off! Just like training wheels on a bicycle or going off to college, the vast majority of them seem to know when to say good-bye. By the last week of school, we were having a *Don't Fret* graduation party as I removed the decals and wished students well as they moved on to high school.

I have no vested interest in promoting *Don't Fret* and began using them on an experimental basis. But I do want the most efficient means to musical independence for students whose only support is their orchestra director, and *Don't Fret* provides that. I know when they go home to practice without a parent or a teacher to help them they will have the skills and confidence to help themselves. In class I am able to spend very little time explaining how to play a passage and much more time having students actually make music. I can see at a glance when a student needs personal assistance, and I can make corrections quickly. My students have lower frustration levels, and our attrition rate in orchestra is almost zero.

Please feel free to contact me to discuss in more detail the value of using *Don't Fret* in a public school orchestra setting or come hear our orchestras if you're in the Portland, Oregon/Vancouver, Washington area.

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