

Finding My Rhythm as a New Teacher

by Carson Coomes, Orchestra Director, Blythewood Middle School

As a fourth grader, I remember being shuffled down to my school's auditorium one morning for a performance from the fifth grade strings class. I had no clue what to expect, but it captured my interest. I was captivated by the many instruments and decided then that I would pursue learning a stringed instrument.

That decision impacted the rest of my life.

Shortly thereafter I was preparing for my first orchestra class, praying I could play the cello and relenting when told to pick something smaller. "As long as it's NOT the violin." I had an incurable desire to be unique, which led to a viola being placed in my hands. Before orchestra classes began I remember sitting in the living room at home, staring at the instrument with wide eyes full of wonder and admiration.

Fast forward to my freshman year at the University of South Carolina. I decided to major in music education. My teachers have succeeded in inspiring me to complete the cycle they began: enter the classroom, instill a love of music and learning, build relationships, inspire the next generation, and repeat. As a new student at the university, I was able to be a part of the UofSC String Project, an organization that hosts students from across the Midlands in beginning orchestra classes, private lessons, and ensembles. First year undergraduates in the program begin as classroom assistants, then progress to having private studios as sophomores. As juniors and seniors, undergraduates maintain their private studios and teach second year and beginning orchestra classes. Not only was I able to get real life and real classroom experience, but I was also able to form relationships with students that still keep in touch!




Carson Coomes is the Orchestra Director at Blythewood Middle School. She was raised in Spartanburg, SC and attended the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Music Education.


She has performed as a member of the UofSC Symphony, the Palmetto Chamber Orchestra, and the UofSC Jazz Strings Quintet. She co-presented "Principals of Playing Unique to the Viola, Part 2" with Dr. Daniel Sweaney, and a session on rehearsing a jazz string ensemble with the UofSC Jazz Strings Quintet and Dr. Craig Butterfield at the American String Teacher's Association National Conference in March, 2017. She has also worked with the South Carolina Philharmonic Youth Orchestras, conducting the Prelude Orchestra for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 seasons. She still performs in duos, trios, and quartets in the Columbia area.

When my senior year arrived, I could not believe that the time had come for me to enter into the classroom myself. I was nervous and anxious, despite knowing I had received high quality training for the seven semesters leading up to that point (the Imposter Syndrome symptoms were real). But I wasn't just anxious; I was excited! I was eager to please, hanging onto every word and ounce of feedback my coaching teachers offered. I remember keeping a journal of their advice and reflections, and frantically taking notes during our debriefs following a lesson. My podium time and their advice helped boost my "bag of tricks," and I began to find my own teaching style.

In the Fall of 2017, I put my teaching strategies to the test as a middle school Orchestra Director. It felt good to have my first real gig as an educator. I was staying in an area where I had connections and mentors. I was entering into a district that supported and promoted the arts. And I was coming into a school program that was well known. An added bonus – the other music teachers were brand new too, so we could start fresh and build our programs in a way that encouraged and promoted growth and collaboration. I remember waking up on my "first day of school," putting on my "first day of school" outfit, taking my "first day of school" photo, and getting to the building only to find that I was absolutely terrified. I had a plan, but having a plan and putting said plan into action are NOT the same. Even doing something as simple as going over my Orchestra Handbook felt daunting.



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As you may have assumed, I survived my first day, and learned quickly that getting through the first year would be all about survival. I remember one afternoon in the fall, I was in my classroom working during a planning period when my phone rang. The person calling was Nicole Skeen, a representative of the Carolina Teacher Induction Program (CarolinaTIP). I had heard of this program before, but I was not in the business of saying yes to every opportunity that came my way during year one. "It's all about survival. You can say no," was my motto. I had overextended myself during my senior year in college and did not want to bring that stress upon myself again. But there was something in the way Nicole described the program that caught my interest, she spoke of CarolinaTIP with so much passion and the teaching profession with sincerity.


I caved and said “Yes!” And Nicole’s reaction?
Absolute joy.

How could I say no to a program that so desperately wanted to aid my profession? How could I say no to a program that would benefit my students? How could I say no to someone who wanted nothing more than to help me become the best version of myself in the classroom? Exactly – I couldn’t.

To be candid, I was skeptical about the benefit this program would be to me at first. As a middle school orchestra director, I was leaning heavily on my colleagues and music mentors to help me with daily classroom instruction. Many general classroom instructional strategies don’t quite fit my teaching mode because of the fundamental differences between a music classroom and core content classrooms. But I quickly realized that CarolinaTIP was not just about refining my teaching skills. It was about building relationships and empowering me to build relationships with my students. Did we create classroom management plans? Yes. Did Nicole sit down with me personally to wrestle with how to better pace my sixth grade instruction? Absolutely. But CarolinaTIP did this in a way that made me feel valued in my profession. Their feedback and consideration was rooted in experience and above all else, their belief in the value of relationships.

I survived that entire first year in the classroom (and the following three)! Throughout every year there are tears and regrets, lessons learned, and tweaks made. But one thing remains the same — the importance of relationships. Something I like to tell my students is, “I’m on your team, no matter what.” I want my students to know that above all else, I support them and am invested in their goals, hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Do I want them to play their notes in measure 57 in tune? Yes. But even before the music making begins, I want them to know that I care.

So as the 2021 school year begins and I approach another year riddled with uncertainty, I can lean on the relationships I have with my mentors, colleagues, CarolinaTIP coaches, and my students. I look forward to making music in the classroom again, but more importantly, I look forward to continuing to get to know the familiar and new faces that enter the orchestra room this fall.



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