

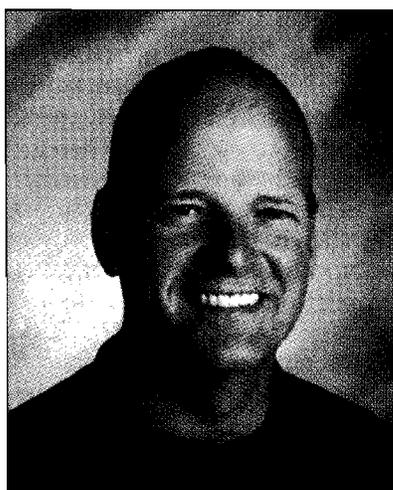
# High School Students Teach Beginners How To Play and Practice

by Charles W. Staley, Jr.

Students in the top wind ensemble at Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, Illinois, give lessons to fifth graders from four elementary schools in the district. In these 30-minute sessions student teachers go beyond the basics of playing an instrument and explain the details of how to practice effectively. The guidance from older students begins while the novelty of playing an instrument is still fresh.

Most of those who are selected to be student teachers take private lessons and all have completed five training sessions and passed a proficiency test. Since this program began nine years ago, music enrollments have increased and the drop-out rates have declined as a whole.

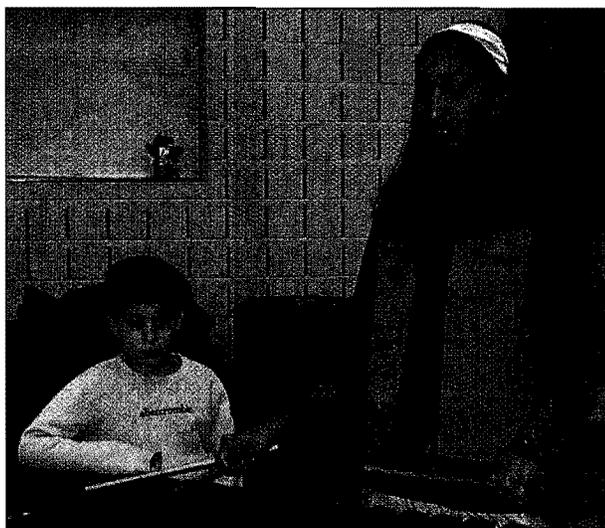
The idea to use older students first came about in 1993 when Nancy Plantiga, a middle-school teacher in the district, asked whether some of my students could coach the younger students in her band. The high schoolers readily agreed and enjoyed helping out so much that I decided to implement a regular program pairing student teachers with beginners. In the original effort Nancy Plantiga coached student teachers in effective teaching, and I expanded this into a course called guided practicing teaching.



*Charles W. Staley, Jr., earned degrees from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is fine arts chairman at Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, Illinois. Staley teaches the wind ensemble, jazz ensemble, and marching band. Neuqua Valley was a Grammy Gold Signature School in 2002 and 2003. Staley has presented clinics at the Illinois Music Educators State Convention, Northern Illinois University, Northwestern University, and the VanderCook College of Music.*

I recruited a few exceptional high school students for the pilot program and collaborated with the elementary band director, Kelly Donahue. She recently commented that one of the greatest benefits of the program is that beginners look forward to playing in the high school band and continue to study their instruments. It is normal for high school students to be unsure at first if they are qualified to teach effectively, but I am available to them between classes and after school if any problems arise. Most student teachers start with five pupils and drop or add students as they learn how to better manage their time. They do not refuse to teach unmotivated students, but beginners who continually miss lessons either drop out of the program voluntarily or eventually discover that there is no longer room in the schedule for them.

Most adult teachers spend more time in lessons fixing mistakes than praising what a student does right. We encourage student teachers to emphasize correct playing because most beginners know when they play a wrong note but are not likely to notice when their breathing, tonguing, or embouchure has improved. Student teachers are



trained to spot and praise each small improvement and accomplishment. They also play along with beginners during lessons, which provides a tone to match and builds their confidence.

One of the reasons the tutoring program works well is that the high schoolers give specific information about how to organize a practice session and how to work slowly on difficult notes and phrases. The lessons are structured much like a practice session at home, including a careful warm-up and several repeated exercises. Student instructors use repetition to clarify concepts before moving on to new material, because the younger students begin to recognize patterns in different pieces of music this way.

The beginners write down the assignments in a spiral-bound notebook and log each practice session at home during the week. Student teachers review these practice logs to determine how much time the beginners spend on the music and to chart their progress.

Student teachers are trained not to lecture students who come to lessons unprepared but to spend that session reviewing materials from past lessons, working on breathing, phrasing, and articulations. They also play the assignment from the previous week. Each lesson ends with a short piece or exercise that the beginners can play, which can be a favorite piece or a duet.

At times the high school students have been unprepared for lessons with their teachers, and it is interesting for me to see how they react when the tables are turned. Student teachers talk among themselves about the frustrations of having students who don't practice much. This is a process of discovery and revelation for the high schoolers, and I have been delighted that this realization often causes them to practice more.

During the first lessons the older student plays along with the teacher, focusing on breathing and fingerings. In this call-and-response method the student teachers get acquainted with the beginners and discover which of the basic concepts need the most

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*A student teacher (left) guides her elementary student during a full group band rehearsal.*

work. As beginners progress through the band book, they move on to playing duets.

Another approach is for the student teacher to demonstrate good breathing or playing position, which the younger students imitate, without giving explanations. This approach is easier for high school students than trying to find the words to explain each new technique. By playing more and talking less, the beginners end up playing for most of each 30-minute lesson.

During the training sessions I emphasize that many of the concepts that are easy for a high school student, such as playing a four-bar phrase, are difficult for a fifth grader. The approach I suggest is to divide difficult music into small sections for the beginners to learn separately before combining these into longer phrases. This is an important habit for beginners to learn. After several repetitions using a call-and-response approach, beginners can soon play a passage repeatedly with few mistakes. The next step is for the beginners to identify the problems and suggest a way to break it into smaller chunks. The goal is for a student to move on only after each segment can be played cleanly.

The assigned instrumental method books usually introduce new skills at a slow pace, and student teachers supplement these lessons by teaching a contrasting technique. The difference between shallow and deep breathing or hard and soft articulations becomes more vivid when the student teacher demonstrates it. The contrast between the two methods is easier to grasp than it would be if a single concept were isolated. Comparison is far more effective than any words of explanation.

Student teachers sometimes turn a lesson into a game to test how well a beginner can match what the student teacher plays. Most problems can be fixed with a simple comparison, as when a student tries to determine if a note sounds higher or lower than what the teacher plays. This can be applied to longer or shorter, and louder or softer playing, with the student always trying to match the teacher.

Although many concepts can be introduced through demonstration, some explanation is often necessary. One particularly curious

beginner questioned why his student teacher had said that a mouthpiece should be gently twisted onto the trumpet and never smacked in with the palm of the hand. Before the older student could respond, the beginner hit the mouthpiece again with his hand, producing a resounding pop. This solidly wedged the mouthpiece in the leadpipe, and the student took it home. There his father extracted the jammed mouthpiece with a large pair of pliers and twisted the leadpipe. After \$125 of repairs, the beginner learned why he shouldn't pop the mouthpiece and the student teacher vividly understood that the hardest part of teaching is finding just the right words to describe a particular step in terms young students will understand.

Student teachers are also taught that the difference between a criticism and a suggestion often lies in the tone of voice or facial expression. One fifth-grader mistakenly thought the directions a student teacher had given in a lesson carried an implication that the elementary school band director had given bad advice and promptly told her so at the next rehearsal. The student teacher was shocked to receive a call from the director who wanted to check on the facts of the story.

Most elementary students travel to the high school students' homes for lessons rather than go to the grade school. They set up a music stand, a metronome, a tuner, and two chairs and post a teaching schedule by the phone in order to confirm or change lesson times easily. Student teachers also pass out a payment schedule to the parents and establish strict standards of behavior for the beginners who parade in and out of their homes. Experienced student teachers often share their experiences and advice with new recruits as they go through the training program. The most effective suggestions are compiled in a list and passed on to future high school instructors.

Donahue combines all four of her beginning bands for a joint concert at a local middle school twice a year, and the high school students regularly sit in with the more than 200 elementary school students during the rehearsals to help answer questions and demonstrate good rehearsal etiquette. Student teachers direct the young students through the halls to the band room and the auditorium, and the younger students see a few familiar faces in an unfamiliar school.

Through participation in this program, high school students quickly learn to have some patience when problems aren't immediately solved. They also learn to be more organized, flexible, and energetic during these lessons. Their enthusiasm carries over to the high school ensembles.

The connections older students make with beginners during lessons and joint rehearsals is powerful motivation for the beginners. Elementary school teachers frequently tell me that the beginners who have a student teacher prepare their concert band music more thoroughly than those who don't. The dropout rate among elementary students has declined, and some of the early crop of beginners have reached high school and themselves are learning what it is to be a student teacher. □

#### Student-Teacher Advice

- Purchase small spiral notepads to record assignments.
- Find out the elementary school concert dates and attend as many as possible.
- Celebrate birthdays with a homemade card and a pencil or eraser.
- Collect payments for lessons a month in advance to encourage attendance.
- Set a flexible 24-hour notice policy for missed lessons.
- Avoid extra-musical incentives such as stickers or candy in favor of playing duets and performing favorite tunes.