

Reversing the Pyramid

Across the country, the student body of a typical independent studio looks something like this: a majority of young beginners, a fair number of middle-schoolers, and a small percentage of dedicated high school students. These older students generally represent only a fraction of the beginners who originally started in the studio eight or 10 years ago. What piano teacher doesn't treasure and take pride in these few more-advanced students? They are positive proof that perseverance and dedication can result in a high level of musical achievement. High school students give us the opportunity to teach the advanced repertoire we love and they also serve as shining examples to our younger students.

A few years ago, I recognized that my studio numbers had gradually been changing, and that, amazingly (because I hadn't really planned it!), I now had as many or more high school students as beginners. I was retaining higher percentages of the students I had started, and new high school students were attracted to my studio as transfers and beginners. As this trend continued, I began to consider factors contributing to this reversal of the typical pyramid, where a wide base of beginners supports a diminishing number of more advanced students, until only a few remain at the very point of the pyramid. Here are some strategies I think may have helped reconfigure the pyramid.

Maintain musicianship as broadly and deeply as possible.

Our high school students want and deserve to know us as musicians, not only as piano teachers. If we bring exciting new ideas and experiences to each lesson, our students will feed on our energy. The more specific we can be, the better—sharing a difficult passage in a piece we're practicing, a quote from an amazing composer biography, a brief report on a concert we heard, an update on our latest conference. All of these examples help students understand what it means to be a professional dedicating one's life to something with unquenchable passion and commitment. Also, we can use the wealth of resources available to us by scheduling master classes or lessons for our students with colleagues who have special areas of expertise. Our students will immediately see that we're open to growth and connected to a larger world outside our studio.

Incorporate curriculum, scheduling and opportunities specific to high school students.

As we retain more high school students in our programs, the demand for versatility and responsiveness to individual goals expands exponentially. High school is characteristically a time of intense personal growth; students move from youth to adulthood, laying the groundwork for many influential decisions of their lives. Their needs can no longer be painted with a broad brush. We have to let them in on our planning process and ask them which opportunities they really think they can benefit from. Some components that can be included in our curriculum to encourage high school students are:

1. Enter students in a high school honours recital sponsored by your local music teachers' organization.
2. Teach music that students request for general enjoyment and school talent shows.
3. Encourage improvisation for students in high school jazz bands.
4. Explore advanced repertoire within its historical context and be ready to cultivate the advanced technique necessary for this repertoire.

In my current class I have a senior preparing for a theory/ear training/sight singing and piano proficiency audition at Berklee College of Music, a senior preparing for a music theatre audition, a sophomore who plays in the jazz band and accompanies the high school chorus, and a junior who wants to enter competitions and prepare for a college piano performance audition. Responding to their individual needs is the key factor for successfully teaching these students.

Build a distinct high school community within the studio.

There's a place a few miles from my home called "Starland" with a rock climbing wall, an arcade, bumper cars, miniature golf, laser tag, batting cages and snack bar. In the late summer or early fall, I invite all my students from seventh through 12th grade to assemble at Starland. I contribute towards their admission fee and we stay for about three hours. We have a blast and the students talk about it all year long, begging for the next time they can go. We take tons of pictures and put them in an album (they laugh at

the ones of me the most.) This trip has nothing to do with music, but everything to do with forming a social, musical bond. Through the Starland trip, my students have formed relationships that they never would have formed in the studio, being scheduled at disparate times and coming from different towns and schools. I also get group tickets to a “Broadway in Boston” musical in the spring. This trip is open to all high school students and their parents. They pay a group ticket rate and we have a fantastic time. We’ve seen *Wicked* and *Light in the Piazza*.

Participate in area high school music programs and seek collegial relationships with area school music faculty, as well as with independent teaching colleagues.

Though we know our students deeply and have known them for many years, we don’t see them in the potent and relevant setting of their high school, an environment where peers and group dynamics strongly influence their future. The more effort we expend on becoming a part of their musical and extra-curricular lives, the more connected they will feel to us. The time it takes to attend band concerts, to help students prepare for jazz band and choral accompanying and to simply ask questions about what’s going on in school really pays off!

Be attentive to the high school “psyche” within society and be aware of the human factor.

High school students are hungry for strong, positive role models and for interaction on an individual basis with a caring adult. While always relating within appropriate professional and personal boundaries, we must strive to communicate honestly and openly about serious issues—the college application process, career decisions and work life, for example. All communication must be on an adult level—colourful, image-filled and relevant. And there is great benefit in a small amount of self-disclosure, sharing that we have been there and truly understand.

Place high school students in a mentoring role with younger students.

This can be achieved simply by asking a waiting student to accompany a beginning student on the teacher duet part or by preparing for an older student to teach a group class on some aspect of theory or technique. Students love peer learning, and it’s difficult to say whether this aspect of our program holds more benefit for the older mentor or for the younger student.

Support high school students through thick and thin, but do not compromise standards.

Our society asks a lot of its high school students. They are expected to achieve in multiple areas, manage their time like CEOs, contemplate their futures and maintain all the traditional aspects of social and family life. Being on a growth curve that is fast and furious makes them, in many ways; more mature than previous generations, but sometimes exacts a price of serious confusion and stress. We can bring humour—an essential factor in being successful with this age group—compassion and a certain steadfast stability to our students just by being there and by being who we are. However, our relationship must have at its core musical growth and learning, the reason we are participating in students’ lives in the first place. We can earn respect and shape behaviour by helping our students achieve balance between the difficult, technical mastery of the piano and the humanity required to connect heart and soul to this technical accomplishment.

Pay special attention to seventh and eighth grade students since these are the years when attrition typically takes place.

Not even the most successful teacher can definitively say what keeps students engaged in lessons throughout their middle school years. I maintain that it is during this time that they begin to see their identity as musicians and begin to “own” the experience—not just as an activity they are signed up for,

but as a pursuit of self-expression and deeply rewarding accomplishment. The more we can nurture that reward through the excitement of the music, the more meaningful the experience.

I recently asked one of my high school students what she valued the most in my studio and she said quite simply, "Before I started with you, I wanted to know if you understood high school students and if other high school students felt comfortable coming here." If we create this "comfortable" environment, we have accomplished quite a lot indeed. And, the experiences gained by our high school students will endure and flourish far beyond the confines of our studio. As we help shift our students' identity from music student to that of musician, we discover the essence of successful teaching—we create patterns of independent learning and love of music which will last forever.