

All-State Preparation Tactics

By: Adrian D. Griffin

There is nothing quite like that moment every summer of opening your inbox and discovering the bold title mixed in with twenty unread emails, "All-State Music Region Cuts."

Preparation for this big event brings a host of feelings for teachers ... concern about the difficulty of the chosen excerpts, anticipation for seeing our students make a leap in their technique, and mixed feelings about what it will take from us to take to get them there.

However difficult or hard the music may be, preparing All-State auditions presents an awesome opportunity for orchestra and band directors to create something really exciting for young players to aspire to. When this opportunity is presented in the right way, every player in your group can experience personal and musical breakthroughs out of what it takes to prepare a great audition.

On a practical level, before handing out the music, make sure the print is clear for the kids; blow it up for them if it is small, and create a more legible version for them if it is blurry. Review the music in advance and share with your students what challenges and opportunities they will find in the music for their specific instrument.

Within the first week, make sure each student has access to a recording of the excerpts. If there are no professionals in your community to provide a model for you, contact your college buddies and ask them to upload a video for your students to watch.

Sectionals

Use sectionals before and after school to provide students with guided and supervised practice. These sectionals will jump-start students who don't have the confidence to face the challenge on their own! Once these students realize their own potential, they will motivate themselves to keep going. During the first sectional, talk about effective practice strategies, and break each etude into three or four shorter sections to help them focus and prioritize their practice.

Sectionals save time for all students (including motivated ones) by ensuring that everyone learns the music correctly the first time. Universities in your area may provide a similar opportunity in the form of All-State clinics, which help students to learn the music rapidly and create healthy competition as all the kids learn together.

Dust off the Recorder

As students begin to progress on the music, use taping assignments to benchmark their progress, establishing in advance the specific segment and dates on which it will be recorded. The first assignment should be a recording of the whole etude, so they can go back to this recording three months later and see how far they have come! Be sure to specify tempo and musical goals as

appropriate, and consider using achievement levels (“gold,” “silver,” etc.) to recognize superior accomplishment. Grade the students on both preparation and improvement.

Partner-Up

Having a major audition can be a good excuse to create a practice buddy system, which will continue to benefit students throughout the rest of the year. When making practice buddy assignments, match students who are playing at a similar level and whose personalities are a good fit. Encourage practice buddies to meet after school, either in a practice room or in one of their homes. Check in with students periodically to make sure they are meeting with their buddy and keeping each other on course!

Simple Tools with Great Results

For students who are not able to purchase a tuner or metronome, create a sign-out list to use the band equipment (on school premises). Similarly, ask students if they have a quiet place to practice at home, and provide opportunities for students who lack this resource to sign out practice rooms or the band hall. When possible, use after-school time to listen to students practicing in the practice rooms or band hall, and offer suggestions as appropriate.

Sharpen those Pencils

Teach students to mark their music as needed, writing reminders in problem spots that are just big enough that they catch their eye when they are playing. Too many students like to keep their sheet music in mint condition. This is a mistake! Show them your own music to help reinforce that good musicians mark their music freely to avoid repeating familiar mistakes.

Everybody is Invited

To encourage students who otherwise might not take the all-state audition, it is helpful to make portions of the music mandatory for chair placement auditions or challenges. Besides providing a mock audition experience for students who *are* taking the audition, it engages students who would otherwise avoid this challenging music, and ensures that they will receive some of the same benefits of preparing it.

Live

Live play-offs provide an even more intense attention-getter for students. Nothing puts the students more on the edge of their seats than thinking they will be playing for their peers that day in band! Give the students a few days notice so that have time to practice. Then, each day, draw a name randomly out of a hat, and ask that student to perform. Students work hard to not make a fool of themselves, they get practice channeling their nerves ... and you get a classroom of very prepared students.

Master-Class

Once the students have begun to make headway on the excerpts, invite a professional to perform the music for the students and give a master class for the students who play that instrument. Also ask them to prepare some comments for the band or orchestra as a whole about audition preparation strategies and tips for performing under pressure. Even if students have already heard the same thing a hundred times from you and their private teacher, students will take it seriously from someone they perceive as an expert! Prepare a hand-out for students on audition preparation and provide this to your private teachers so they can reinforce these lessons.

Recognition

Once the audition has past, be sure to give some significant recognition to students who took the audition in front of the full band or orchestra. Let students know in advance that the winners are the ones who went for it, not just the ones who “made it”! These students deserve the recognition from the teacher and their peers for their hard work and audacity. Seeing this year’s students rewarded with praise from their teacher and fellow students will motivate the other students for future years.