

Podcast Script

(Intro – 0:00)

(open with soft, comforting intro music for about ten to fifteen seconds, fade out, speaker comes in)

Welcome, everyone. My name is [Full Name] and before we get into today's topic, I'd like you to imagine a scene with me.

(new music begins playing, something light and bouncy, speak clearly and deliberately)

You've just moved to a new school district and you're walking into the first day of school at this brand new high school. The first several classes of the day have been filled with the same boring activities from your old school: having a teacher read through and explain every small detail of a syllabus you finished two minutes into her lecture, another teacher leading you through "get to know each other" activities (more awkward than usual since everyone here does, in fact, already know each other), and countless students bumping into each other in the hallways as everyone's looking down at their schedules to figure out where their next class is.

You've navigated through all these monotonous activities and have finally made it to the one class you've been waiting all day for: band class. You were so excited for this class to be different from the rest that you hurried right in without noticing that... there was no one at the door to greet you. You find an open chair and eavesdrop on the conversations circling around the class as your new friends try to figure out what this new teacher is going to be like. You quickly realize there was an old director who just recently retired and feel slightly comforted in the fact that this your first experience of the day that's new for everyone else too.

(light music abruptly stops with the sound of a closing door, slowly fade in more dramatic, serious music)

As soon as the door in the back of the classroom closes, everyone quiets down as their eyes follow the person holding both a clipboard in her hands and an uncomfortable expression on her face. She makes her way to the front of the class and begins her address:

(still have music playing but soft enough where vocals aren't covered up)

"Good afternoon, everyone. As many of you know, our school has recently been searching for a replacement director of bands all summer. Unfortunately, the administration have not been able to find a suitable replacement. The school board has left us with two options, find a long-term substitute to hire as a less-than-qualified interim, or cut the program entirely."

(fade in concerned classroom chatter noise as music swells with a high-pitched ringing sound effect beginning to drown everything out through the next lines)

The rest of whatever it is she has to say to soften the blow falls on a classroom of deaf ears as everyone immediately finds someone to share their reaction with. You, however, are left alone with nothing but your thoughts and brand new anxieties to ponder as you sit there and wonder,

(cut out all noises)

“How could things have gone this wrong?”

(Intro Continued 2:30)

(pause, slowly fade in slower but not sad background music)

This scenario is of course a dramatic representation of the state of music education in America but nevertheless, it still gives us a glimpse into what’s really going on in this profession. There are fewer and fewer music teachers each year from the increasingly significant number of teachers leaving the profession and the ever-decreasing rate of music education majors graduating from college. Today, I want to tackle this issue as we look at it from the perspective of the three main groups that have influence over these numbers: School Districts, Teacher Preparation Programs, and the Teachers themselves. There are key steps that these groups can be taking to reverse this downward trend, but first, what exactly IS this trend?

(End of intro, beginning of background 3:10)

(quickly, but not jarringly, switch music, same feel just different track)

The nationwide teacher shortage happening in America is real and has been well documented. The Learning Policy Institute released an update in 2024 of what the shortage numbers looked like during the 2023-24 school year. In that report they revealed that in my home state of Missouri alone, there were 891 total unfulfilled teaching positions and 1,932 open teaching positions that were filled with inappropriately certified teachers. In total in America they estimated that there were 406,964 unfulfilled or inadequately filled teaching positions. Yikes.

Not only are these numbers big and dramatic, they also represent real schools, real classrooms, and real students without teachers.

It seems that every time I talk with someone adjacent to education, the teacher shortage is a topic I can bring up right alongside COVID and AI as common ground, topics everyone has opinions on.

This overall teacher shortage of course impacts music education and to figure out what some of the root causes behind the shortage in music were, the National Federation of State High School Associations created the Music Educator Workforce Coalition (these names just roll off the tongue, don’t they?). This coalition joined forces with some of the biggest names in music ed like Music for All, the National Association for Music Education, the American Choral Directors Association, and many more. Last year, they published a summary of their findings with a list of their identified root causes:

- An accelerated rate of teachers leaving the profession after the pandemic with their replacements largely being uncertified or inexperienced teachers
- A 14% decline in music education graduates in the past decades
- And a severe lack of diversity of music educators with almost 93% of all music teachers being white

These solutions to these root issues begin to line up perfectly with our aforementioned list of influencers: school districts, colleges, and teachers.

(End of background, beginning of main point one 5:00)

(keep music playing, vocal pause, bring back in vocals and slowly fade out music)

Let's now begin to take a look at how all of these groups impact and influence one another as we try to figure out what, if anything, there is to be done about this problem.

In 2021, Professor of Music Education at Illinois State University Dr. Phillip Hash laid out some numbers concerning music education students in college. He details how between the 2011-2012 school year to 2018-19, the national number of graduates in music education declined by an average of 1.2% per year. So not only do we have teachers leaving the profession like we talked about earlier, but there aren't enough students to fill their positions. Backing up even further down the line, there need to be more students entering this major to being with. How do we get them there? Teacher recruitment.

This type of advocacy is something Dr. Hash calls for pretty repeatedly in his paper. He talks about how the main influence students have to consider music teaching as a career comes from their current music teachers. This news did not come as a shock to me considering that my former music teachers were precisely the reason I chose to consider this career in the first place.

While current teachers recruiting future teachers sounds great in theory, in order to actually be prepared to enact this type of advocacy, there needs to be cooperation from colleges to be training their music ed majors on how to be effective ambassadors and recruiters to their future students. Are you starting to see how all of these pieces fit together in this giant, overlapping bowl of music soup?

(End of main point one, beginning of main point 2 6:15)

(go from no music to some background music)

All right, it's time to address the elephant in the room. That big, ugly stat I mentioned earlier about race. Nearly 93% of ALL music teachers are white. That is a significant, unacceptable lack of diversity in our field.

Full disclosure here, I recognize that I'm speaking about this topic from the perspective of a white guy, who has only ever been taught by white band directors. While I am by no means an expert on diversity, after doing all of this research and finding this lack of diversity as a common theme, I feel it is entirely appropriate to mention in today's discussion.

The Journal of Research in Music Education published an article in 2022 where the authors surveyed 972 current elementary school music teachers for details on their projected career plans. It was through that research that they unexpectedly discovered a common theme:

“Teachers who taught in environments with less diverse student populations were more likely to stay in their position”

Once you understand that sentiment is coming from a majority white sample size, it's pretty obvious that this is a closed-loop problem. Teachers would rather not teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds which means those students aren't going to find a home in those music classrooms and definitely won't want to go on to teach a music class of their own.

Backing up the chain once again, we can see a potential problem with the inherent structure of music education college programs. These programs are pretty western-centric and focus on a narrow selection of genres, two factors that make the field increasingly less appealing to diverse students. These programs also aren't adequately preparing college students to teach in diverse classrooms causing an immediate disconnect between the teacher and student population.

(End of main point 2, beginning of recap 8:00)

(Fade in light music to ease the mood, wait ten or so seconds before speaking, leave music playing during next section)

Before we move on, let's quickly take a look back at what we've discussed so far.

The teacher shortage in America is real and is having direct impacts on the field of music education. Across every state there are large numbers of jobs being left unfilled or being occupied by unqualified, sometimes unlicensed teachers. The root causes behind why there is a declining number of music teachers comes down to three main reasons: more active teachers leaving the profession, less music education majors graduating from college to fill their empty spots, and a severe lack of diversity contributing to a repeating cycle of minority students not finding representation and not wanting to become teachers.

(End of recap, beginning of main point 3 9:00)

(Leave music playing through transition and next section)

So, we've covered that we need more teachers in the field and that one of the best ways to get more music students to consider teaching as a career is through teacher recruitment, but what exactly does this teacher to student relationship look like?

Well, back in 2019, a group of researchers from the Journal of Research in Music Education decided to seek out the answer to that question. They examined the motivations and influences of current high school music students who expressed an interest in becoming a music teacher versus those who didn't. This team found that quote “the choice of occupation to pursue music teacher or other choices is more multidimensional than accounted for in previous studies.”

This general statement was not surprising, however, their summary continued to reference teachers as the primary motivation for future potential music teachers. When addressing this relationship specifically, the authors state quote “If music teacher education is to continue to thrive and provide competent new teachers who can continue to work toward broader support of music in schools and the arts in our society, it will be important for music teachers to encourage future music teachers, not just future musicians.” End quote.

I love the way they summarized that idea, and I don’t think I could have said it any better myself. Great music teachers can and should produce more great music teachers. That teacher to student relationship is so important not just in the context of the positive effects it will bring to both individuals, but in the long-term benefits possible for the music field as a whole.

(End of main point 3, beginning of personal anecdote 10:45)

(Fade out music, only speech no music here)

As I mentioned earlier, my main motivation for becoming a music teacher comes from the positive impact my former music teachers have had on my life. I specifically remember one day in eighth grade with my middle school band director Mr. Van Biber. Band class that year happened right after lunch and every day I would try to make sure I beat him back to his office in the back of the class to prank him. Sometimes this looked like hiding his conducting baton (record for best hiding spot remains the day I hid it inside of his saxophone), but most days this looked like me simply sitting in his spinning office chair trying to pretend I was a serious band director myself. One day, however, I beat him back to his office and acted like I was typing furiously away on his computer. Whenever he walked in and saw what I was doing, instead of furiously reprimanding me for touching his equipment and being in his office space, he instead walked over to the computer and pulled up a website called hacker typer dot net.

(Quickly start dramatic music that’s aggressively techno and fast paced)

He showed me that as you pressed random keys on the keyboard, the screen on this website would illuminate with green text against a black background as if you were hacking into the Matrix itself. Sure enough, the next day he walked in on me in his office “hacking” my way into his computer and began to play along shouting things like “No! What are you doing! Don’t delete all of my files and steal my identity!”

(Quickly end music)

Interactions like these stand out in my memory as times I felt truly understood by a teacher and even though that goofy story has nothing to do with him teaching me music, it shows just how impactful a teacher can be. Naturally, as I grew to have a better, enjoyable personal relationship with Mr. Van Biber, I was also more attentive to what he had to say in his teaching and here I am today studying music education at his alma mater Missouri State University.

(End of personal anecdote, beginning of conclusion 13:00)

(Fade in soft, reflective music)

Music education is the subject I'm most passionate about and the teacher shortage really affects me. As I began to do the research and take a look at what the shortage actually looked like, I initially became super disheartened and concerned for this career field I care so much about. I also have to remind myself that just because there will most likely be many open positions in a few years when I begin teaching does not immediately mean I will have success in finding a job.

The reality of the teacher shortage is one I'm unfortunately required to be prepared for. I have no idea how this will affect me whenever I am a teacher, but I have no doubt it will. Personally, I feel like I have gained a lot from this research. I am continuing to grow in my understanding of what it means to be a band director like Mr. Van Biber. A director who puts his students first and is always more focused on growing their abilities than he is on his outwardly experienced success. In addition to guiding my students towards being better musicians, I must also be guiding them in their pursuit of becoming more compassionate, understanding human beings.

As a teacher, I want to challenge myself to be understanding of students from all backgrounds and ensure that my classroom and the music community is a place where all students can find a home.

The teacher shortage in America is real and is directly affecting the field of music education. Everyone who has influence in the future of music education is obligated to do what they can to reverse the current trends in our country. School districts must encourage and support their teachers as they recruit future music educators. Colleges must change to adequately prepare their future teachers to be knowledgeable and adaptable when interacting with students of culturally diverse backgrounds. Colleges must also be preparing future teachers to be the frontline advocates of music education as teachers live out their recruitment. Finally, current music teachers have the ultimate responsibility of direct influence in their classrooms, influence they should use appropriately as their recruiting platform.

Change is possible, necessary, and long overdue. I would encourage each and every one of you to examine the influence that you have in your own spheres and to challenge yourself to think how the small, everyday actions you take can have a much longer, future positive impact. That's how our world gets changed. Thanks for listening.

(Positive outro music 15:00)