Zachary S. Nelson is a dedicated music educator and Carrollton native currently in his sixth year of teaching in Carrollton City Schools. He holds both a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts in Music Education from Jacksonville State University, where he performed in numerous university ensembles and served as the graduate assistant for the jazz program.

Mr. Nelson serves as the Assistant Band Director at Carrollton High School, part of an award-winning program that has performed at the Georgia Music Educators Association State Convention and continues to earn superior ratings and statewide recognition. He is deeply grateful to work under the leadership and mentorship of Dr. Christopher Carr, whose guidance continues to shape his growth as an educator and musician. Mr. Nelson is also thankful to serve in a district that strongly values and supports music education, and he appreciates the leadership of Principal Ian Lyle and Superintendent Dr. Mark Albertus.

In addition to his work in the classroom, Mr. Nelson remains active in the local music community. He performs with the Carrollton Wind Ensemble and the Carroll Symphony Orchestra and serves as a musician at A Place of Refuge Church.

Outside of his professional commitments, Zachary treasures time with his family. He and his wife, Mackenzie, enjoy life together with their children—Travis, Madison, and Amya.

What is one thing you have learned that you would love to share with new band directors?

There is so much I could say here, but one lesson rises above the rest.

Personal accolades are meaningful. Awards, recognitions, and milestones can encourage us and sustain us during difficult seasons. However, we must constantly remember why we do this work. It should always be about the students — and not just the students in our band hall, but the future leaders, professionals, and servants of the very community we have chosen to serve.

My advice is not simply “do it for the students.” It is this: learn the community you serve.

Especially at the high school level, your role can extend far beyond rehearsals, performances, and contest results. When you intentionally connect your program to the heartbeat of your community, the work becomes far more rewarding. I believe one of the true gems of being a band director is community outreach. Music has a unique way of bridging the gap between school and community in ways few other programs can.

For example, each year during homecoming, after we participate in the parade, we take our seniors and student leaders to several assisted living homes to perform. Our cheerleaders often join us, and it becomes a powerful, intergenerational experience. It is something our students, staff, and the residents genuinely look forward to every year. Likewise, a local veterans organization partners with us annually for our Veterans Day concert. Those moments remind us that when you pour into your community, it pours back into you.

There are countless ways to build those connections, but the central message remains the same: learn your community. Serve it intentionally. When you do, your program becomes more than a class — it becomes a cornerstone.

What is your favorite piece you have conducted?

What a great question. I may have to give two answers.

There are so many incredible works being written today — from towering pillars of our profession to exciting new voices shaping the future of band literature. If I had to choose a work by one of the giants in our field, I would say *Amazing Grace* by Frank Ticheli.

That piece is breathtakingly beautiful. It evokes a wide range of emotions — pride, reflection, reverence — and from a spiritual perspective, a deep sense of love and gratitude. I am a man of faith, and the lyrics of *Amazing Grace* serve as a powerful reminder of how much my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, cares for me. When I conduct this work, it is not simply about shaping phrases or balancing chords; it becomes a deeply personal moment of reflection and thankfulness. When performed with sincerity, the piece becomes more than music — it becomes a shared experience that resonates far beyond the final note.

On the other end of the spectrum, one of my favorite more contemporary works is *Infinity* by Katahj Copley. If you have not heard it, I highly recommend giving it a listen. The melodic writing is captivating, and the pacing of the work is masterfully crafted. Each section flows seamlessly into the next, and the energy builds in a way that is both thrilling and musically satisfying. It is the kind of piece that absolutely gets my adrenaline pumping on the podium.

Both works, though very different in character, remind me why I love what we do — music has the power to inspire reflection, ignite passion, and connect us in ways that words alone cannot.

What advice do you have for college music majors? What are some things they can do to prepare for their first job?

College coursework does an excellent job of preparing future educators in many ways. You learn how to write lesson plans, study pedagogy, and gain foundational proficiency on instruments across the different families. Those skills are important.

What college does not always teach, however, are the nuanced, real-time decisions required to become a successful and sustainable band director.

What happens when the lesson you so carefully planned begins to unravel because students are not grasping the introductory concept? What do you do when an activity is not landing the way you envisioned? How do you adjust when the piece you selected centers around a strong trumpet voice — and that particular year, your trumpet section is still developing? Those are the moments that define your growth.

Learning how to assess quickly, pivot effectively, and truly instruct from the podium is not something fully mastered in a methods class. My advice is to observe as much as possible. Spend time in local middle and high school band rooms. Watch how experienced directors rehearse. Notice how they diagnose problems, how they pace instruction, how they communicate expectations, and how they select literature that fits the strengths and needs of their ensembles. Do not be afraid to ask professionals why they chose a certain piece or how they approached a challenging section in rehearsal. Those conversations are invaluable.

In addition to musical preparation, I would strongly encourage college music majors to learn about the organizational and financial side of running a program. Understand the role of band boosters and how they function within a school community. Familiarize yourself with grants, sponsorships, and creative fundraising opportunities. A thriving band program requires financial resources, and the more you can lessen the burden on students and families, the greater access and participation you will cultivate.

Being a band director is about far more than conducting patterns and lesson plans. It is about leadership, adaptability, vision, and stewardship — of both people and resources. The more you prepare for the full scope of the job, the more confident and effective you will be in your first year and beyond.

What teachers inspired you to become a teacher? Who continues to inspire you?

I have been blessed with a number of teachers and mentors who poured into me at pivotal moments in my life.

It began with my high school drum instructor, Billy Christol, who truly awakened my passion to teach. At the time, my focus was percussion, so that's what I wanted to teach. It wasn't until later that I knew I could teach much more.

My time at Jacksonville State University further shaped and solidified that calling. Professors such as Thomas McCutchen, Renee Baptiste, Dr. Andy Nevala, and Myrtice Collins, among many others, encouraged me academically, musically, and personally. They challenged me to grow and I am eternally grateful for their guidance.

As I began working as a percussion director, I was also deeply influenced by high school directors like Chad Hannah, Eric Willoughby, and Michael Kobito. Watching how proficient they were on the podium — and more importantly, how intentionally they connected with their students — reignited and strengthened my desire to teach. They demonstrated that success in this profession is not just measured by performance outcomes, but by the relationships you build and the lives you impact.

Music has always felt like both a gift and a calling for me. Seeing how these educators shaped students not only as musicians, but as people, confirmed that I wanted to do the same. Their influence continues to inspire me daily as I strive to pour into my own students the way so many poured into me.

What advice do you have for percussionists who are also band directors, or aspiring to be band directors?

First and foremost — do not sell yourself short.

As percussionists, we sometimes carry an unspoken insecurity when stepping into a full band director role, particularly when it comes to wind pedagogy. There will absolutely be things you do not yet know or fully understand about brass and woodwind instruments — and that is okay. You will learn. Give yourself permission to grow.

Be patient with yourself. Mastery does not happen overnight. The same disciplined practice habits that made you a strong percussionist will serve you well as you expand your knowledge base. Study tone production. Sit in on instrument-specific clinics. Ask questions. Lean on colleagues. Growth in this profession is continuous for all of us, regardless of our primary instrument.

It is also important to recognize that some of the most outstanding directors in our state and beyond began as percussionists — some you might never even guess. Percussionists often bring a unique strength to the podium: heightened rhythmic precision, attention to detail, and a deep understanding of ensemble timing and balance. Those are invaluable assets.

Most importantly, do not let doubt define your trajectory. You belong on the podium just as much as anyone else. Commit to learning, surround yourself with mentors, and trust the process.

You've got this. Hang in there.

Who is inspiring you right now?

In addition to those who shaped me early on, I continue to be inspired by colleagues and leaders who are making a meaningful impact right now.

Christopher Carr has been incredibly instrumental in the success of our band students and in my own professional growth. His knowledge of music education is extensive, but what truly sets him apart is his leadership. He was nominated as the GMEA District 7 Teacher of the Year and previously earned the distinguished honor of Teacher of the Year within our school system — an achievement that speaks volumes about the respect he has earned from peers and administrators alike. Beyond the band room, he is viewed as a leader throughout the district and has served in various capacities within GMEA. His professionalism, vision, and commitment to excellence continually challenge me to grow.

I am also inspired by Maria Menendez, a phenomenal educator whose program continues to develop at an impressive pace. Year after year, her students demonstrate measurable growth, a testament to her intentional instruction and high standards. Her service in leadership roles within her school further affirms that she is seen as much more than a band director — she is a trusted leader and difference-maker.

Additionally, Kevin Brown and Ann Wilson inspire me deeply. Their continued success is helping pave the way for future educators of African descent, providing visible examples of excellence and impact. Representation matters. When young educators see leaders who look like them thriving at high levels, it expands what feels possible. I have witnessed firsthand the joy and connection their students experience — clear evidence that lives are being touched and changed. Their service in advanced leadership roles within GMEA further underscores their influence and dedication to our profession.

The foundation of our success also rests heavily on the work of David Trumble. Without the incredible job he does with our beginning students, we simply would not be where we are today. He sends students to the middle school level with strong foundational knowledge and skills — the kind that sets programs up for long-term growth. His approach to recruitment is thoughtful and strategic. He has a remarkable ability to spark interest in young students and, just as importantly, keep them engaged and excited about band. That consistency at the foundational level makes everything we do possible.

I would also be remiss if I did not mention my principal, Ian Lyle. Having recently stepped into his role, a few years ago, watching him navigate the complexities of leadership has been both encouraging and inspiring. Leadership is not about perfection; it is about growth. Seeing him lead transparently — even owning mistakes when necessary — demonstrates professionalism and humility that we should all aspire to. That willingness to grow publicly and lead authentically sets a powerful example for our entire school community.

Being surrounded by leaders who model excellence, humility, vision, and intentionality motivates me daily. Iron sharpens iron, and I am grateful to serve alongside such outstanding educators.