

Today Milford - GMEA Music Educator Spotlight

What inspired you to become a music teacher, and specifically a jazz band director?

I was inspired to become a music teacher by my high school band director at Martin Luther King Jr. High School, Mr. Travis Kimber. I was a member of the jazz band for two years, where I learned a great deal about theory, improvisation, and jazz history. I continued my musical journey in college as a member of the FAMU Jazz Ensemble I. I also performed with a brass band, 3-Point Brass Band, where we played throughout Tallahassee, often performing improvised music.

How did your own experience with jazz music shape the way you teach your students today?

My experience with jazz is what ultimately inspired me to teach it. I have enjoyed performing in a wide variety of settings, and I strive to provide those same opportunities for my students.

What are the most important skills middle school students need when first learning jazz?

Confidence, a basic understanding of music theory, including scales and key signatures, and an awareness of different styles are essential. Rhythm variation is especially important, as it is what makes jazz engaging and expressive.

How do you introduce improvisation to beginners who may feel nervous or unsure?

Start simple. The blues is a great foundation. I often introduce the pentatonic scale as a starting point for improvisation—I even call it the “secret scale” they can rely on while building confidence.

What strategies do you use to make jazz engaging and fun for younger students?

Performance is key. Students join band to perform, and those in jazz band often have an even stronger desire to do so. I incorporate familiar songs with music they know and that their parents can recognize, and focus on creating enjoyable, memorable experiences.

How do you balance teaching music theory, or do you at all, with middle school jazz musicians?

I teach theory through the music itself. Different pieces introduce different concepts, and explaining those ideas in real time as we play makes them more meaningful and applicable.

What challenges do middle school students commonly face when learning jazz, and how do you help them overcome those challenges?

Confidence is one of the biggest challenges. Many students fear making mistakes, especially during the preteen years when they are highly aware of others' perceptions. I address this by starting small and limiting the number of notes they use. Pentatonic scales provide a nearly foolproof framework for improvisation, as long as students focus on creating interesting rhythms.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to become a music teacher or jazz band director?

Go for it. Seek out resources, read, and ask questions. The creative side of making music is incredibly rewarding, and teaching it allows you to help students develop a skill they can carry with them for life.

Looking back on your career so far, what has been the most rewarding part of teaching jazz to middle school students?

The most rewarding part has been seeing students create their own ensembles, perform gigs independently, and realize that their improvisation skills and love of jazz can even provide them with opportunities to earn money at a young age.