

# *A Year In the Life*

**OF BEGINNER STRINGS**



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# INTRODUCTION

The first year of study for a strings player can be both full of surprises and clearly defined as a multi-year path.

A string instrument is a key that unlocks two worlds: the emotion-based world within us and the world we inhabit. Armed with these tools, a string student can know themselves well and actively engage in the world, forming new friendships and discovering the treasures the world has to offer.

This month-to-month template has been tested through 33 years of public school teaching, building a strings program in Wilmington, MA from 12 to over 400 students. It's based on a sense of purpose that unfolds over ten years, from grades 3-12.

**The secret to its success is simple:** Define the ten-year path and fill it with traditions that celebrate respect, harmony and community pride, transforming the lives of all who follow you. Good luck!

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## AUTHOR BIO



Ward Dilmore comes to Encore Tours having been a client for nearly 20 years. His Strings Attached Orchestra from Wilmington, MA, toured with Encore every two years, and as a result over 1,400 musicians' lives were transformed from their experiences.

Ward is a graduate of Interlochen Arts Academy and holds a Bachelor and Master's degrees from SUNY Potsdam. He has taught grades K-College and is an Emmy-nominated composer with 7 albums on iTunes.

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# SEPTEMBER: PREPARE FOR SUCCESS

The sooner you can present your strings program to prospective students, the better your prospects for success. You won't be the only person during the month offering an exciting opportunity for the year, so you'll need to paint a clear picture that promises the fun of learning and the rewards of a great adventure.

## A SEPTEMBER CHECKLIST

- In a group presentation to elementary students, explain the “personality” of each instrument and demonstrate each with a very short musical excerpt.
- Explain the lesson schedule; how each lesson prepares them to participate in an exciting tradition during the year and through the next ten years as well.
- Give a hand-out that explains your program and goals, and provide an invitation for the parents/guardians to join the parent support group meeting (with the time and place).
- Are you hosting an instrument rental evening with local supplier(s)? If yes, include that information along with the name of your method book and where can they purchase a copy. Stress the benefits of renting versus purchasing an instrument for a growing child. Give parents a list of area rental stores.
- Let the local music stores know what method book you're using so they can have them in stock, along with strings, rosin, shoulder rests and music stands.
- Keep the other school teachers informed of your schedule and be flexible. There will always be disruptions to your schedule that force you to quickly find a solution.
- Make 8x11 folded music stand cards with student names so you can quickly take attendance and learn names.
- Remind your students of their first goal: the December concert. Paint a clear picture of that concert at every lesson. If you only see your students once each week, repetition is the key.



# OCTOBER: HOST A PARENT NIGHT

Once this month gets rolling, you'll get your rhythm established. The first step in October is to organize a parent night to get to know your parents and allow them to understand your plans for the upcoming year. Below is a list of agenda items perfect for your first parent meeting.

## PRESENT GROUP NAME AND MISSION

In Wilmington, MA, my group was called "Strings Attached." Our motto, seen on hundreds of bumper stickers around town, read "The Best Things In Life Have Strings Attached." That was our name and our sense of purpose all in one.

## WHAT IS YOUR SENSE OF PURPOSE?

Tell the new parents where you're going with the program. Define the path that your students will follow. Tell the parents this is more than just music lessons. You are competing for your students' time as are other exciting programs such as gymnastics, sports, scouting - and did I mention, sports? Why is your program so special?

## HOW ARE LESSONS SCHEDULED?

Let the parents know how often and what days your lessons will take place. If your lessons are pull-out lessons, give them statistics on how students who study a musical instrument excel in academics.

## WHAT ARE THE EXPECTATIONS?

What do you expect of your students? How will you measure their success? How will you grade?

## THE PARENTS' ROLE IN PRACTICE

When string students are in a rehearsal, they are expected to demonstrate technique developed at home during private practice. An ensemble, like a community or family, is as strong as the weakest member, and a parent can encourage their child to be a leader in their section by striving to be as outstanding a role model as possible.

## WHAT ARE THE CONCERT DATES?

When can you expect to see the parents again? What are your performance dates?

## GIVE INFORMATION ABOUT RENTALS PROGRAMS

Where can they rent an instrument? How will they be sized? What method book will they need? Other supplies they need such as music stands, rosin, extra strings, fine tuners, etc. can be discussed.

## DISCUSS UPCOMING FUNDRAISERS

You need help raising funds for all kinds of purposes: music, instruments, trips, scholarships and more. Enlist an enthusiastic fundraising coordinator from the parent group and set up a spread sheet to keep track of money raised by each student.

## GATHER EMAIL ADDRESSES

Communicate with your parents often. Starting a "strings family" will keep your students in your program through the years. Email them at least once each month and, if you hold monthly parent meetings, let them know when upcoming meetings will be held.

## DISPLAY "STRINGS STORE" ITEMS

A Strings Store can sell extra strings and rosin, music stands, t-shirts, bumper stickers, key chains, music portfolios, sweatshirts, pencils, pens and even teddy bears! This can be a great way to promote your program and its mission.

## SHOW THEM UPPER GRADE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

My elementary students knew they would be traveling to Europe in high school. I informed the parents from the very first meeting. It helped define the path and gave everyone a sense of purpose and a reason to practice, fundraise and support each other.

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# NOVEMBER: 3 GOALS

Now that you're two months into the school year with your elementary strings program, there are three goals you can strive to address:

## 1. PURPOSE

- Having a sense of purpose is critical. It's more than the notes! What values does your group represent? What traditions uphold them?
- When and where are your performances? (Need more? Try nursing homes and malls.)
- Offer classroom concerts - keep them short, use them to recruit new members and build respect.
- By now, you've had at least two parent meetings to inform your "partners" about where you're going with your strings program and how they can help their kids get there.
- Hand out schedules of lessons each month to students, teachers and parents.
- Ask for parent volunteers for fundraising events and other support positions.
- Remind the parents to encourage their kids to practice. It is essential to the success of the orchestra.
- Create your ensemble's press kit. Download our "[Ultimate Guide to Creating Your Ensemble's Press Kit](#)" to learn more.

## 2. THE BIG GIG

- Your first holiday concert date is \_\_\_\_\_.
- Create concert invitations with your students.
- *Jingle Bells* is a perfect tune for beginners. Learn it in "chunks!"
- Teach respect: have your students learn to bow to say "thank you."

## 3. LOVE DAY

Look beyond the holiday concert to February 14th. A successful concert means your students can participate in a ceremony to induct them into strings. Tease them with the opportunity, but wait to reveal all the details.



# DECEMBER: THE HOLIDAY CONCERT

## THE HOLIDAY CONCERT

It's finally here! Your first benchmark on the path from your elementary strings program through high school strings.

## PROMOTING THE CONCERT

You've already had your elementary students create invitations for their very first concert and hopefully many parents will be able to see their child's first musical performance. It's a milestone for parents as well as students, so encourage family members to take a photo with their child before the performance begins. Take a moment to step away from the podium and take a photo with your group as well. Be sure to include that photo in the local papers, social media and group website!

## ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE

Use the moment to inform the audience that this concert is the first step on an exciting path that really never ends. Tell them about the audition in February called the "Arch of Bows," another milestone when your high school strings players will audition the elementary group as an ensemble and welcome them into the "strings family." Let them know the date (February 14th, Love Day!) and time of the ensemble audition.

Remind the parents that practice is essential for the group to progress. Also remind parents that the rewards of their child's hard work are numerous, including opportunities for travel. If you have traveled with your older ensembles, tell the audience of their accomplishments and let them know that those opportunities were created from this very moment.

Let the audience know when your next monthly parent support meeting will take place. If you have a parent support president or board member, have them speak for one minute about the need for parent support.

In short, performances are moments where the director can inform the parents and teachers about where the students are on the path and what moments of discovery lie ahead.

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# JANUARY: PLANNING ARCH OF BOWS

## THE ARCH OF BOWS

This month provides an opportunity to prepare for the most meaningful tradition to date: The Arch of Bows.

It's a ceremony to teach your students the harmonious aspects of membership in your orchestra. Together, your students will learn the positive aspects of being members of a family of musicians who learn, support and perform together.

## A PLANNING CHECKLIST

1. You have approximately five weeks to teach your students Beethoven's *Ode To Joy*. Played in the key of D in unison, the Ode has enough repetition and challenge to inspire your students to perform their ceremonial music with a real sense of accomplishment.
2. Choose a date for your ceremony, as close to Valentine's Day's as possible and as early as possible during the school day.
3. Reserve a cafeteria or gym room for your ceremony.
4. Send invitations to parents. It will be a moment of great pride for family members to attend this private ceremony.
5. Obtain permission to take the high school strings players on a field trip to the elementary school for the ceremony. Arrange for bus transportation and schedule lunch at a local restaurant for them, if necessary.
6. Order ribbons with medallions (preferably with a music theme) for each beginner. During the ceremony, the parents will place the award ribbons around the neck of their child.
7. Alert the local media about your ceremony and have them send a photographer, if possible.
8. Delegate to someone to run your "Strings Store" featuring strings items sold after the ceremony.
9. Delegate to someone to manage the award ceremony between parents and their students.





# FEBRUARY: THE ARCH OF BOWS

A Valentine's Day milestone on the path from elementary through middle school, culminating in an international music tour in high school.

## GETTING STARTED

Parents of beginning strings should arrive fifteen minutes before your ceremony. Explain the significance of today's tradition to them: it's an induction into the strings family (and parents play an important role in the family). What begins today culminates in an international concert tour in high school in the future. Describe the adventures this moment creates for high school students and offer to have a high school member speak on the topic. If you have a member of your parent support group present, allow them a moment to explain their role and the time and place of monthly parent meetings.

## THE PERFORMANCE

Line-up your high school strings members facing the line of parents, with about 15 feet separating the two groups. Call the beginning strings members to the ceremony and have each beginner stand in front of their parent facing the high school strings.

Explain the process: beginners will perform as a team and, if the high school members feel they have achieved a satisfactory level of accomplishment, they will bow to the beginner student when they are finished playing. This indicates that they are now members of the strings family!

Before the beginners unpack, have the high school strings perform one rousing selection, with the beginners as "living music stands." Then the groups will switch. Your elementary students will perform *Ode to Joy* in unison while the high school strings players hold the music for them.

Your high school students will bow to the beginners to signify they have achieved membership (after some quiet discussion among the high school students, of course!). All members will introduce themselves to the nearest older/younger player.

## THE ARCH AND AWARDS

For the Arch of Bows, line up the high school strings in two parallel lines, facing each other and holding their bows in an arch formation. Position the parents at the end of the lines and the beginners at the head of the lines. One-by-one, new members go through the arch with their first name chanted by the high school students. At the end of the arch, family or parent support member places ribbon around the new member's neck and presents a folder with their middle school audition music that will qualify them for their international tour (the next goal on the path)! To end the ceremony, take a group photo and spend the rest of the time mingling and shopping at the "Strings Store." After, enjoy your scheduled lunch with the high school students.

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# MARCH: PREPARING FOR THE GREAT ADVENTURE

Present a clear view of the new members' next challenge: an audition to qualify for an international music tour in high school. In order to qualify, the 6th and 7th grade strings students will work in harmony as a team to reach a high level of performance expertise. You will have two years to prepare them!

## PLANNING THE AUDITION

With parent and school support, begin making arrangements for a great audition adventure. I took my students on a 2-day excursion to Lake George, NY, reserved the best hotel with inward facing rooms (within walking distance to the harbor) and reserved a dinner cruise ship for the audition.

I hired two independent judges to adjudicate our two memorized performance pieces. A combined score of 85 or better qualified the ensemble for a trip to Europe in the high school strings program.

The trip home included a stop at a theme park to celebrate and high school strings greeted the returning busses along Main Street as the police and fire department provided an escort back into town.

## PREPARING THE MUSIC

Start choosing two pieces of audition music for your new 4th grade members and their 5th grade teammates. Start with small doses and paint a clear picture of your goals: musicianship, teamwork, trust and pride. Every lesson will now have a goal: prepare the team for their next steps on the path during middle school and high school. Remind them that their instruments are now keys that open the doors to the whole world. And you, their Director, can put the whole world in their hands.

Along with age-appropriate selections for the year-end concert, present the new middle school audition music in very small chunks. *William Tell Overture* is excellent for this. Remember: you have two years to prepare, and the goal is to have the new members stay with the program with dynamic and rewarding weekly lessons.

The year before their transition to middle school, organize a field trip for the elementary strings to join their older colleagues who will be their teammates on the two-day audition adventure.



# APRIL: PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE



April is the month that holds the promise of success for your May concert. It's your last chance for music preparation and just as important, it's time to distribute concert information to the parents.

## LONG-TERM PREPARATION

- Explain your long-term goals for 6th and 7th grade and begin to talk about the fun adventure you've planned for the coming years, complete with photos.
- You've chosen your two audition pieces to be performed on your 6th and 7th grade field trip. Begin by chopping your audition pieces into small "chunks" and plan the technical exercise portion of your weekly lessons to strengthen your students' mastery of the challenges in each "chunk." Remind them how their progress will open new doors of discovery.
- Keep teaching the easier selections for your final concert as well, remembering that the short and accessible pieces will keep their self-confidence at a high level and provide an impressive year-end concert presentation.
- Your ensemble is a social organization. Spend a couple of minutes in each lesson discussing the itinerary of their middle school trip: describe their motor coach experience, the hotel amenities and the behaviors you expect. Their middle school audition experience is really a test of their readiness to travel internationally with their ensemble during high school. In short, everything you teach now, both musically and activity-wise is in preparation for life in middle and high school.
- Have you chosen your musical theme yet - the one you use to close every lesson and concert? *The Water Is Wide* is not only an excellent musical theme, it also embodies the concept of teamwork and harmony. It's part of a collection of traditions that form the core of your ensemble's sense of purpose.

## TO SUMMARIZE APRIL'S OPPORTUNITIES

- Today's lessons are a preparation for tomorrow's great adventures.
- The social aspects of your ensemble are as important as the musical challenges.
- Traditions, such as a theme song, are the elements that will remain with your students forever, so incorporate them into every lesson.
- Your year-end concert is your best opportunity to demonstrate your ensemble's future goals.

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# MAY: A JOINT CONCERT

This is the pinnacle month, with your final concert featuring your students' accomplishments from the past year and a showcase for your goals with your parent supporters.

If the entire string program from elementary through high school can be assembled together in a large hall or gymnasium at the same time, your younger players and their parents can hear the progress and see the path through the years. The energy generated from the collected members will be a long-lasting memory!

When your students perform, alternate your group performances, one selection at a time for each ensemble, so there's no time spent resetting the chairs and no chance a huge portion of your audience will leave when their child's ensemble finishes their portion of the concert. The entire collection of strings students can perform their theme song at the end of the evening, en masse.  
**The message is clear: strings is one ensemble on a multi-year path.**

Be sure to recognize your parent support group's fundraising progress and use the time between selections to describe the goals for the coming years. Invite new parents to attend support meetings in the fall!

Good luck and have fun during an evening full of pride and promise!

## TO SUMMARIZE MAY'S OPPORTUNITIES

- This is your greatest opportunity to define and explain your progress and your goals. Don't be shy! You're the emcee.
- "Thank you" goes a long way! Include as many as possible in your expressions of gratitude because it's been a team effort.
- If you need to have a dress rehearsal during the school day, be highly organized with permission slips and details for parents regarding rehearsal and concert times, place, dress and a reminder if you're going to have a raffle or fundraiser table. Order your busses well in advance if you need them for your dress rehearsal.
- How will your students be arranged before and during the performance? Do you need a seating chart? Name cards taped to the chairs? If your dress rehearsal is on the day of the performance, can your students leave their instruments under their chairs so you can tune them when they leave?
- Do you need a microphone and PA system? Is someone recording the performance to put online?
- Are you charging admission - tickets purchased at the door? Who is in charge of this?
- Have you utilized the tips in the Encore Press Kit?



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# JUNE: BUILDING YOUR STRINGS PROGRAM

It's finally here! Your last month gives you a moment to send your new strings students on an independent study path for a couple of months. Here are some elements you may want to include in your final weeks of school:

## CELEBRATE

You and your students deserve to have some fun. Plan a party in the schoolyard with refreshments. A music bookmark, kazoo, balloons, anything fun and festive will be a great way to celebrate your milestone.

## PREPARE A SUMMER PACKET FOR YOUR "GRADUATES"

- Include sheet music from some favorite selections, such as *Happy Birthday*, *Surprise Symphony*, *Lightly Row* and a couple of exercises/scales.
- Offer your high school strings students an opportunity to teach one or two beginners during the summer for Community Service Points, now a requirement for graduation in most high schools. Include contact information in case some of your beginners wish to receive extra help over the summer.
- Have a few passages from the middle school audition music in their packet that the beginners will be performing in a few years.
- "Music word finds" and "music crossword puzzles" are always a fun addition.
- Include a round sticker with the word TUIT, so they no longer have to wait until they get around to it.
- Make a list of some of the high points of the coming new school year.
- Include a sheet for referrals of your students' friends who may wish to join strings next year.
- Add in a cover letter for parents explaining the purpose of the packet and what it contains.
- Give students a few music stickers, a pencil or pen and a luggage tag for their case (ask your Encore Sales Rep to send these free items a few weeks before you assemble your packets).
- Include a list of items they'll need during the next semester, in check-list form.
- Give a required due date when the packets are due (usually by the first lesson in the new semester).

Have a relaxing summer and enjoy a needed vacation. Good luck, have fun and don't forget to practice!



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Develop your group's mission and theme.** Choose a theme song that reflects your values, such as *The Water Is Wide*. Perform it at the end of every lesson, rehearsal and concert at home and around the world.
2. **Define the 10 year path** for your beginners and get high school students involved with your elementary program to show them what great adventures lie ahead.
3. **Break it down.** Remind students that great adventures begin with small steps, break everything down into weekly steps leading to success.
4. **Plan exciting performance opportunities** such as the Holiday Concert, Arch of Bows and a special audition. Make these important points of celebration along the path.
5. **Get parents involved.** Host monthly parent meetings and enlist parent volunteers. Remind parents that very few classes are focused on emotions and feelings, harmony, respect, teamwork and family values. Your focus is on all of these.
6. **Teach respect.** An ensemble is a microcosm, an allegory for harmony. What your students learn in your class has a real-world application. Create a classroom environment where respect for each other is the norm: "Stand Partner Day" is a great tradition.
7. **Encourage uniqueness.** Remind students that they are special because they are unique. Being unique requires confidence and the effort to sustain that confidence.
8. **Bridge the chasms.** There are two chasms in public school: elementary to middle school, middle school to high school. Bridge those chasms by taking your students across them early and together as a team.
9. **Embrace the community.** Let the police and fire department escort your group back into town when they accomplish great things. Let the town be proud of their ambassadors.
10. **Sports teams win or lose. Strings always win.**
11. **You are important.** To be a teacher is to answer the greatest calling on Earth. You will probably be the only teacher a student has for multiple years and they *choose* to be with you. Treat that reality with utmost care and respect and be proud. The good work you do as a teacher will live on for the rest of your students' lives when they apply what they learn to real life experiences: get them out in the world to share their gifts.

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# NEED ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR RUNNING YOUR STRINGS PROGRAM?



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