



HALI TAUXE/DEMOCRAT
Apalachee Elementary School strings teacher Jimmy Gillis tunes an instrument for one of his students.

FRESH CANVAS

Arts teachers back in the swing

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Parents, students, and teachers have started to ease back into the routines and rituals of the school year, for the most part. Inevitably, someone's already missing a lunch box and at least one parent has had to negotiate their child's complaint of general malaise and the predictable request to stay home that follows it.

Arts teachers, too, are getting back into the swing of things and they spend a good portion of the summer preparing for the year ahead.

"It's like getting ready, to get ready, to get ready," said Megan Sahely, Raa Middle School's orchestra teacher. Though classroom initiatives are top of mind for many teachers all



summer long, in the week preceding the students' return, teachers and administrators really buckle down. "You have 40 hours of work to do in your own classroom but you also have district meetings and faculty meetings and, and, and."

Sahely is beginning her second year at Raa and, though she has an additional year of experience teaching in Kentucky, she's still getting used to the complexities and the logistics that go along with being an arts educator. "The sheer amount of

paperwork that we have to do to do our jobs can be overwhelming to me. The mountain of behind the scenes work to get our kids playing is staggering."

Timotheus Harper took on the role of band director at Godby High School midway through last school year. With just a few months of classroom experience, he is actively defining his instructional style and methods. He's been busy teaching a beginning band camp at Godby all summer and his to-do list is long. It includes classroom management planning and the revision of the physical learning environment.

"Visually, when students walk in the door, what are they thinking about

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as soon as they start looking at the walls? I'm working on things like that to get them to understand the kind of atmosphere they're going to be in." Harper adds, "that is a whale of a load in itself. We have a whole week and, in my opinion, it's not enough time to effectively prepare. Some of us are going to have hundreds of kids over the course of one day. The timing is a challenge."

Other arts teachers are rethinking their instruction and curricular content entirely and are developing new lessons to meet the immediate needs of their students. Oak Ridge Elementary School has a new principal and an intervention plan is underway to raise student performance. Art teacher, Rashad Curry is working to align his course content to reinforce the concepts students are learning in other subject areas.

Billy Penn is kicking off his fifth year as the art teacher at Killlearn Lakes Elementary School



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Conley Elementary School was the meeting place for district's art teachers during pre-planning week.

but before that, he taught for a time at Oak Ridge. He had some advice for Curry and was eager to provide specific examples of cross-curricular applications for the art room. That's one of the many benefits of district-wide pre-planning; teachers can learn from one another, gather inspiration, find support, and grow professionally.

Penn likens preparing for the school year to a roller coaster. "The ride itself is fun but it's the waiting in line. My knees are shaking, I get buckled in and there's a shoulder harness so I know there's going to be a loop in it. It's the anticipation that's tough." With a new year come new surprises like policy revisions and staff changes. That means teachers have to be nimble and adjust quickly.

Veteran art teacher Jason McMillian has been at WT Moore Elementary School for fifteen years and he admits that, even at this stage in the game, "the first day back is quite a shocker." Over his tenure, he has developed an impressive bag of tricks. "You accrue lessons that you like a lot and that have been so successful that I know I'll use them again, though I might continue to tweak them."

McMillian rejects complacency and strives for improvement. He's always on the lookout for "new assessment ideas and new theories on what art teachers should focus on now, staying current and modern. I did a workshop this summer on differentiated instruction and there are so many ideas that it is sometimes hard to keep up with."

"Teaching is much more difficult than just saying 'go for it,'" McMillian adds. "It's a lot of work but it's fun to teach something you're enthusiastic about. It's cool to be educating people in the arts. I feel like that's important in our society."

Harper has similar sentiments and, as he begins his first full school year at Godby, he is most looking forward to his beginning band class. "We'll do theory first and then I'll get instruments in all of their hands. That first atrocious sound is going to bring total joy to my soul. You get a unique opportunity to get them to fall in love with music like you fell in love with music so many years ago. Ultimately, that's all of our passion, sharing what we love with our students."

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