

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



# The Truth About Success (It's Not What You Think)

I am about to share with you what I consider to be perhaps the most important secret to being successful as a teacher (or, for what it is worth, just about any profession). If you're soon planning to enter the music education profession for the first time, or if you're a relatively new music educator already working, or if you're a seasoned veteran teacher, this "secret" is pretty important.

A while back and a few years into my career as a music educator, I vividly remember having lunch one day with a number of my non-music teacher colleagues. You might think it odd that a music teacher would lunch with other academic area teachers but let me begin by saying that this daily connection built many bridges outside of the music department. I heartily recommend that you join your non-music colleagues in the teacher's lunchroom now and then. But I digress. Let's get back to the story.

My science teacher friend and colleague, Rich, sat down at our lunch table and silently shook his head in utter disbelief. We asked Rich why he had this perplexed look on his face. Here is a brief overview of what he told us following a phone call with an angry parent. (I'm paraphrasing here.)

**Rich:** "I just had an interesting phone call with the father of one of my students. It seems that the father didn't like the way I dealt with his daughter who had failed her midterm exam in chemistry. The father wanted to know what I was going to do about his daughter taking her midterm exam again after flunking it the first time around. I told her father that because our school has a no-fail policy I was obligated to offer the student some extra help and then a chance to re-take the midterm."

**Rich's lunch mates** (including yours truly): "So, what's the big deal? You did exactly what the school mandates."

**Rich:** "Well, yeah. I explained the school's policy to the father and he wasn't buying it. He said to me that his daughter must not be allowed to take the midterm all over again and that she needed to experience failure, otherwise how would she learn to succeed?"  
Hmm?

For our purposes, this story illustrates a key life's lesson. It's human nature to look for the easy path to success. Many of us do the basic research ahead of time. We often seek out and rely on advice from folks we respect. We look for shortcuts and then we will often try to fast-track our way to achieving success. Well, the fact is that for most of us, it's really a matter of this: success is fleeting. You have to work at it, and experience plays a big roll, doesn't it?

I especially think of those music educators who have only entered the field in the past few years. No one among us was prepared for that fateful day in early March of 2020 when our world changed. We picked up the pieces as best as we could and while some of our colleagues achieved a modicum of success, it's a fair guess that there were lots of us who struggled.

### Advice from a successful artist

I just finished reading a wonderful and funny book chronicling the life of the writer, actor, director and one of the greatest comedians of our time, Mel Brooks. In his book Mel talks a great deal about his struggles at the inception of his career to succeed. He recounts the frustration and disappointment of repeatedly trying to succeed to no avail.

Many of you may remember the Ron Howard / Tom Hanks movie, *Apollo 13*. In the movie when it becomes apparent that the Apollo 13 mission had to be canceled Gene Kranz, the head of NASA Mission Control says the line, "Failure is not an option." Movies don't often capture the complete, verbatim quotes. In fact, what Gene Kranz said was: "No, when bad things happened, we just calmly laid out all the options and failure was not one of them."

That said, we do know that NASA did, in fact, have previous failures. In the case of Apollo 13, the experience of having failed contributed to the success of getting the crew back to earth. So, the path to success is simply this: failure. That's right. Experience that includes failures helps us to succeed. It's okay to fail, although we will certainly try not to make a habit out of failure, will we?

Let's end with a quote attributed to another Brooks. This time it is Max Brooks, Mel's son. Max Brooks is a noted writer and actor like his dad and his mom, the late actress Anne Bancroft. Interestingly enough, Max is also a senior fellow at the Modern War Institute at West Point. Mel Brooks sums up a discussion about success in his book with this short anecdote about his son Max.

It seems that Max was invited to give the commencement address at Pitzer College in California about 10 years ago. We know how graduation addresses are supposed to be optimistic and filled with great advice on how to succeed in life. It is only fitting then that Max Brooks ended his Pitzer College speech with this sage piece of advice ...

"Now, go forth ... and fail!" ||