

## Teaching the Trombone to Students with Special Needs

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Teaching elementary-aged students with learning exceptionalities has become increasingly common each year that I have spent teaching. As a teacher in a centralized school for students with special needs in a large district, I feel I have developed a knack for helping them find success. Admittedly, much of what I do to help students with special needs happens in person. It is my hope that these tools can be translated to the online experiences that you are providing for your students in your various flipped classroom configurations, as necessary during the COVID-19 era.

The students with special needs who enter my band room are classified, most frequently, as LLD (Language Learning Disabled), ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), ESL (English as a Second Language), or SLD (Specific Learning Disability). I have always noticed a high number of students with special needs gravitating toward the trombone. Some research suggests this to parents, as, reportedly, there is less of a requirement for fine motor skills (think about covering holes on a clarinet, or developing proper hand posture on the violin). As trombonists, we understand the nuance to developing fine slide technique, but for argument's sake, expect to teach the trombone to specialized learners at some point during your teaching, potentially for this reason. Begin with these students by removing your own expectations of what the student will or will not be able to achieve based on their learning classification- you will often be surprised!

The organization of your routine and clarity of goals is imperative for the student's success. In some respect, every lesson needs to have elements of the first lesson. Specifically, do not take for granted the importance of safe and careful instrument assembly. Designate a spot in the room for cases, and regularly discuss slide etiquette when removing it from the case (slide locks, etc.). I am very adamant about "no slides in the air" and keeping the rubber "nub" on the ground to prevent slide drops. I often apply "slider savers" by DEG (or similar, available from various online vendors) to protect

from inevitable dents and dings. To get started making music, prompt students simply hold a buzz for as long as they can. Students will enjoy the friendly competition of holding a buzz longer than their neighbor, and may even develop a great deep breath along the way. Displaying a stopwatch in the room during this activity (type “stopwatch” into the Google search bar for quick access) makes this activity, for my students at least, endlessly exciting. Offer the helpful posture and embouchure hints that you normally would to help support a good breath and buzz. My students will also perform call and response rhythmic buzzing with me to get them focused, where (with either a metronome or a steady foot-tap) I make up rhythms and they buzz them back. If appropriate, go around the room allowing the students to buzz a rhythm to be repeated. Do not shy away from performing other simple warm up tasks, such as a five-note scale in whole notes with slide positions visible to get them reacquainted with the instrument that day. This is necessary to grasp from the student’s perspective, especially for students that may only spend time playing their trombone with you during school for 30 minutes a week. Here is an excerpt from our band warm up page that proves particularly useful for students who need the extra reminders. Do not be afraid to create excerpts that are this simple!

**#1 The FIVE NOTE SCALE**

Instrument	B $\flat$	C	D	E $\flat$	F	E $\flat$	D	C	B $\flat$
Trombones:	1	6	4	3	1	3	4	6	1
Baritones:	○ ○ ○	● ○ ●	● ● ○	● ○ ○	○ ○ ○	● ○ ○	● ● ○	● ○ ●	○ ○ ○
	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3

Mapping out slide positions visually is an important activity for my students. The trombone slide can seem rather vague to beginners, so just like trumpeters have the clarity of “first valve, second valve, third valve”, trombonists need to spend time equating slide position numbers to locations on the slide. Veteran trombonists understand the nuance and flexibility to pitch location on the slide, but your young ones may need more clarity, initially. If possible, utilize “drone games”. Play the note D, and very simply ask

the students to “find it”. They can use visual cues (your slide), but hopefully rely on auditory clues to locate positions.

I approach these students with a “sound before sight” mentality. Though I still incorporate many literacy moments with these students (literacy is the goal!), I do not start there. When learning new notes, stand in front of them, show them where the slide belongs, and play the note for them as a long tone. Ask them to join in and allow them to *experience the pitch*; prompt students to make the jump to reading the written pitch later. I love to have students “sing and slide”, where we sing on letter names and put the slide where it belongs, simultaneously. Perform this activity facing one another, focusing on the pitch of the note and the location of the slide. Move on to playing, (short phrases, sometimes even just three consecutive notes) one student at a time, while the others are still singing and sliding. Finally, have them play looking at the notes, prompting them to keep their eyes moving as they play. For this, I use SmartMusic regularly in lessons. The tracking line function is excellent for students learning to move their eyes as they play, and I highly recommend incorporating some type of music simulation software.

Varying the student’s auditory and visual environment can have a significant effect on your student’s success. I experiment with cycling students through reading hard copy music with and without pointing along, as well as reading music on the screen with and without the SmartMusic tracking line. I also cycle through using the stock accompaniments, playing along on the trombone, providing support playing along on the keyboard, singing along, or giving no assistance. Use your own creativity altering what they see and what they hear to vary the environment to provide them with many configurations with which they can find success. The goal here is twofold: primarily, to find what configuration of sight and sound works best for their learning, and secondarily, to instill a sense of musical flexibility. Plan to slowly pull away the auditory aides, to the point that students are truly performing on their own. In regards to discovering a student’s optimal auditory/visual configuration for learning, do not be afraid to tailor a portion of the lesson to each student. It is better to give a student five minutes of your

undivided attention than to have all of your students experience 30 minutes of confusion, while you try to have them play all together all of the time.

There are a multitude of considerations and practices for teaching students with special needs, but I hope that this trombone-specific snapshot of my classroom is helpful to you in your endeavors teaching these students. No well-planned goal is too small. Begin lessons planning to reacquaint the students with the instrument, and take cues from the students on when and how far to push them. In my experience, teaching students with special needs has been incredibly rewarding. Developing new skills, appreciation for music, and a sense of belonging can be so exciting to students for whom learning does not always come easily. Any questions about the content or techniques in this article can be directed to [joshua.p.zimmer@gmail.com](mailto:joshua.p.zimmer@gmail.com).