

# The Performing Arts School Retention Playbook

How to Stop Losing 8-10% of Your Students Every Month (Without Buying More Leads)



If you're losing 8-10%  
of your students every month...

## You're trying to fill a leaking bucket.

Fix the leak



Everything gets easier.

Most music school owners assume their biggest growth problem is getting more leads. But if you're losing 8-10% of your students every month, no amount of marketing will fix that. You're not growing; you're just keeping up. This guide breaks down **10 retention drivers** that actually move the needle, so you can stop the leak before spending another dollar on ads.



## How to use this guide:

This playbook is built for music, dance, and performing arts school owners who are ready to stop losing students they've already worked hard to win.

Inside, you'll find 10 retention drivers, each one targeting a specific reason students leave and giving you a concrete action to address it. Some of these you can implement this week. Others require building systems and training your team over time. **Both matter.**

**If you're just getting started with retention**, go straight to the Start Here section at the end. It identifies the four highest-impact moves and the order to tackle them in.

**If you're already tracking retention and looking to go deeper**, work through the drivers in order. Each one builds on the last, and together they form a complete system for keeping students enrolled, engaged, and progressing.

A note on where to begin: you can't improve what you don't measure. Before implementing anything else in this guide, make sure you turn the page and get to know your monthly drop rate. That single number will tell you exactly how urgent your retention problem is, and how much room you have to grow.

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# 1

## Know Your Drop Rate (Or You're Guessing)

It's easy to feel like you're working hard without getting ahead, until you actually look at how many students you're losing each month. Once you see the number, it stops being a feeling and becomes a problem you can actually solve.



**You cannot improve what you don't measure.**

The number you need to know is simple:  
**Monthly drop rate**

### Simple example:

- You start the month with 100 students
- You lose 7 students
- Your drop rate = 7%

That's too high.

### At 5%:

- You would only lose 5 students instead of 7
- That difference compounds every single month

### Industry benchmark target:

- 5% or less

That's it.

### If you're above that:

- ✔ Growth is harder
- ✔ Marketing feels expensive
- ✔ You stay stuck



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# Track Drop Rate by Teacher

Retention often feels like a school problem, but it's not. When you break it down by teacher, everything gets very clear, very fast. The real issue is almost always at the teacher level, hiding inside your overall numbers.

This is where most people miss it.

They track school-wide retention...



**...but retention is a teacher-level problem.**

### Some teachers:

- Keep students forever

### Others:

- Lose them constantly

### What to do:

- ✓ Track drop rate per teacher, monthly
- ✓ Rank them

### Now you know:

- Who to learn from
- Who needs help



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## Coach Them Up... or Move On

Some teachers quietly drag retention down month after month. The longer it goes unaddressed, **the more it costs you**. Coaching with intention, and making hard decisions when needed, is one of the most impactful things you can do for your school.

### If a teacher is consistently losing students:

- That's not a "bad luck" problem
- That's a skill problem

### Your job:

- ✔ Coach them
- ✔ Give them tools
- ✔ Set expectations

Also set a timeline.

If they don't improve:

- Replace them

One weak teacher will quietly kill your growth.



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## Train Your Staff to Save the Drop

Most drops aren't sudden. They're preventable if someone just steps in and has a conversation. The problem is, most staff don't even try unless you train them to.

Most schools simply accept cancellations.

But every drop request is an opportunity to intervene.

Most staff won't do this naturally, they'll just process the cancellation and move on.

That's why you have to train them to actually TRY to save the student.

**Your staff should ALWAYS ask:**  
"I'm so sorry to hear that. How are lessons going?"

Find the real reason.

### Most drops come down to:

- 1. Too busy
- 2. Lost interest

### Solve the problem:

- ✔ Change the time
- ✔ Switch the teacher
- ✔ Try a new instrument



Celebrate saved drops.



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## Win the First 90 Days

If a student makes it past the first 90 days, they're significantly more likely to stay long-term. But a large percentage of students drop before they ever reach that window, which makes early engagement your highest-leverage retention opportunity.



The first 90 days decide everything.

### Your onboarding system needs 3 things:

A. Quick Wins (Lesson 1–2)

They need to feel: *"This is working."*

B. 30-Day Upgrade Offer

✔ Add time

✔ Add an instrument

More investment = higher retention.

C. Parent Education System

Parents quit. Not kids.

### Teach them:

✔ Progress takes time

✔ Frustration is normal

✔ Recitals matter

**Use automated emails + teacher reinforcement.**



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## Don't Let Them Quietly Quit

One of the biggest mistakes we see in new schools is letting people leave without a conversation. When a meeting is required prior to leaving, **you will save more students than you expect.**

When someone says they want to drop... that's your moment.

### New rule:

- ✔ A drop request automatically triggers a parent/teacher meeting at the next scheduled lesson (before any cancellation is processed)
- ✔ Parent attends that lesson
- ✔ Teacher leads a conversation

### Goal:

- Understand the issue
- Reset expectations
- Offer a new path



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## Build a Reward System

The students who stay longest almost always have something they're working toward. Schools that build in visible milestones and rewards see engagement go up quickly, because progress needs to feel real to keep students motivated.



**Kids stay for momentum and recognition.**

### You need:

- ✓ Milestones
- ✓ Rewards
- ✓ Visible progress

**Include a reward at 90 days.**



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## Create Moments That Matter

The schools that retain the best create experiences people remember.  
**When students feel like they're part of something, they don't want to leave.**

Lessons alone aren't enough.

### Add:

- ✔ Student appreciation party (annual)
- ✔ Events that build connection

**People stay where they feel connected.**



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## Add Group Experiences

Schools with the strongest retention tend to share one thing in common: students who have built friendships inside the school. When students feel connected to each other, showing up every week stops feeling like an obligation and starts feeling like something they look forward to.

**Students need more than lessons.**

### Add:

- ✔ Group classes
- ✔ Bands
- ✔ Workshops

### This builds:

- Friendships
- Accountability
- Enjoyment



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## Show Them What's Possible

The student recital should come first. This is their moment to perform, feel proud, and experience what they're working toward. That experience alone will keep many students enrolled because now they've felt what it's like to succeed.

Then, take it a step further and host a teacher (faculty) recital. When students see their teachers perform at a high level, **it changes how they view lessons and gives them something to aspire to.**

### Students see:

- ✔ The standard
- ✔ What's possible

**This builds inspiration and commitment.**

# Your Retention Health Scorecard

Use this scorecard to see where your school stands today. For each driver, circle the number that best describes your current situation. The gaps you identify here are your biggest growth opportunities.

#	Retention Driver	1 Not in place	2 Partially in place	3 Fully in place
1	I know my monthly drop rate	We don't track this	We check it occasionally	We track it every month
2	I track drop rate by teacher	We don't break it down	We review it sometimes	We track it monthly per teacher
3	I coach or address underperforming teachers	We don't have a process	We address it when it's obvious	We have a clear coaching and decision process
4	My staff is trained to save cancellations	Staff just process drops	We sometimes try to save them	Staff always attempt to save every drop
5	We have a 90-day onboarding system	No formal onboarding	Some touchpoints exist	Full onboarding system is in place
6	Drop requests trigger a parent meeting	We process drops immediately	We sometimes have a conversation	Every drop request triggers a meeting
7	We have a student milestone and reward system	Nothing formal in place	Some recognition happens	Clear milestones and rewards at every stage
8	We create community moments and events	No events beyond lessons	Occasional events	Regular events built into our calendar
9	We offer group experiences beyond private lessons	Private lessons only	A few group options exist	Robust group program is in place
10	Students can see what's possible through performances	No performances	Occasional recitals	Regular student and faculty performances

## Your Score

Add up your numbers and find your range below.

**10–15** Your bucket is leaking. Retention is likely costing you more than your marketing spend. Start with Drivers 1, 2, 4, and 5 before anything else.

**16–22** You have a foundation, but gaps are hurting you. You're doing some things well, but inconsistency is holding you back. Focus on the drivers where you scored a 1 or 2 first.

**23–30** You have a strong retention system.

Your school is well positioned to grow. Use this scorecard annually to stay sharp and identify anything that has slipped.

# Final Thought

Students leave for two reasons:

- Life gets in the way
- They stop enjoying it

Everything in this playbook solves those two problems.

That alone will change your business.

**It's all about building systems that make students stay.**

# Start Here

If you only implement four things:

- Track drop rate ( $\leq 5\%$ )
- Fix your teachers
- Build a 90-day onboarding system
- Train your team to save cancellations

