

To Whom it May Concern,

I have been honored to work collaboratively with Frank Toppa for the past seventeen years, first in my role as a sixth grade teacher, and for the last fourteen, as the middle school theatre arts teacher and ensembles coordinator.

Frank is an amazing educator and musician. He brings a wealth of knowledge and a deep love of music and music history to his work with the children. Frank and I have collaborated on three plays a year since I became a theatre teacher. In grades five and six, I come to Frank with the play and he begins his search for music that perfectly complements the theme. We have had great fun re-working some of the lyrics to standards such as "It's De-lovely" and "It Had To Be You" in order to highlight a character's personality or plot twist. In every show, Frank plays the piano, providing musical accompaniment for the songs, during scene changes, to create sound effects and to establish various moods. He often begins with a musical theme and then plays variations on this throughout the show. In addition, Frank works with these students in his music class to develop an overture made up of various instruments. These overtures can include Orff instruments, drums, guitars, strings, woodwinds, and even an occasional trumpet or saxophone!

Frank has extensive experience directing/music directing musicals. In addition to his work at Belmont Day, he has directed church and community musical theater. Prior to Belmont Day, Frank directed musicals with kindergarten through eighth grade in the Brookline Public Schools.

As our music director, Frank works patiently with the young actors to find the right key for each student's voice. He then transposes all of the music. This can now be done using technology, but for many years Frank was transposing everything by hand! Always thinking of what is best for his students, Frank often suggests double casting to give everyone a chance to be on stage and gain experience. He encourages ensemble members to seek out solo opportunities within group numbers and during scene changes. Frank has taught me so much during our collaborations on these musicals. I am constantly seeking his counsel on how to stage a number, whether or not to add in a dance break, what tempo will best express the meaning of the song, and on and on! I so appreciate Frank's honest feedback about what works and doesn't work in terms of the musical aspects of a show.

What I see as Frank's greatest strength is his ability to connect with the students. He meets them where they are musically and then allows them the time and space to explore and experience the joys of music. After the time spent in Frank's classes and rehearsals, students emerge enthusiastic and confident musicians.

Warm regards,

*Susan Dempsey*

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