

Classroom piano labs are a great extension of any school's music program. They provide students with the opportunity to practice and improve their piano skills at their own pace while still being in a group setting. If you're considering setting up a piano lab in your classroom, then you've come to the right place. This overview will help you get organized and allow you to estimate your set-up costs based on the equipment you need. Thinking of installing a teacher-student communication system complete with headphones? We'll talk about that too. You'll also find arrangement pointers, as well as tips and techniques for teaching group lessons once your piano lab is finished and functioning.

BENEFITS Besides being beneficial for students, classroom piano labs are also valuable teaching tools for music educators. Having a piano lab equipped with a communication system provides you with the ability to teach students at a variety of different skill levels. You can divide students into groups according to their abilities, and thanks to innovative teacher controllers and headphones, you'll be able to monitor and interact with individuals or groups while other students remain undisturbed.

KEY COSTS There are 3 major things you need to take into account when calculating the cost of your piano lab: room size, equipment and number of electrical outlets. If you need help with the installation, remember to factor that fee into the total amount as well.

ROOM SIZE The very first thing you should do is measure the room that will become your piano lab. Obviously, the space you have available determines how many workstations the room can accommodate. To calculate how many keyboards you'll need, follow this general rule:

- 1 keyboard workstation needs a 5' x 5' space. This allows students to sit at their pianos while still leaving enough walking room behind. Students should not be placed so close that their backs are up against the piano behind them. A good amount of space will promote a comfortable playing environment and help prevent damage to equipment.
- Leave at least 4' of walking space around the perimeter of the room.

EQUIPMENT Standard piano labs feature between 8 and 16 work stations. Knowing exactly how large your room is and how many keyboards it can fit will make this part easy. Once you have the numbers, here is what you'll need:

- Individual keyboards (workstations)
- Headphones for each student
- A teacher conferencing system that allows you to listen and communicate with students individually
- If your room can accommodate more than the average 16 workstations, be sure to look into whether you might need other accessories to expand your conferencing system.
- Computers and interactive music software might be another cost to consider if you have larger groups at various learning stages. When some groups require more of your time, others can use the software to keep up with their personal practice or improve their knowledge. This interactive software caters to every skill level to ensure your students remain on-task.

ELECTRICAL OUTLETS Obviously, the more outlets you have, the better. This eliminates the need to use extension cords and reduces the clutter of cables on the floor. The good news is that keyboards use very little power - about 40 watts each. So that means you can have 2 workstations for every electrical outlet. Here are some guidelines:

- 8 workstations and 1 teacher = a minimum of 4 outlets with 8 sockets
- 16 workstations and 1 teacher = a minimum of 8 outlets with 16 sockets
- A separate outlet is needed for the teacher controller unit if you have a conferencing system
- Additional outlets are needed if you have computers, amps, stereo equipment etc.

PIANO LAB POINTERS As you plan your classroom piano lab, make sure to do all the homework necessary to ensure installation goes off without a hitch. Yes, being problem-free is practically impossible but when you're prepared, you can at least diminish the number of issues that could arise. Aim for a lab that's easy to install, easy to maintain and easy to use, all while being cost-effective.

- **Easy to install:** this means you want a lab with a straightforward design that requires no unusual gear like mixers or amps. Installing should consist of setting up your keyboards and running as few audio cables as possible to the controller. You should also only need to press 1 button to listen or communicate with your students.
- **Easy to maintain:** you'll want professional and durable equipment that can handle daily use from students and last for years. Standard digital pianos should endure up to 10 years of normal use. Lab components should work for years with no maintenance, and headphones should only have to be replaced occasionally.
- **Easy to use:** as in, you should not have to read a 200-page manual before you start using your teacher controller. It should be designed in a way that you instantly know how to select individual students. That way, it can be easily used by any teacher you invite to hold classes in your lab.

PROBLEM SOLVING Being over-prepared is always a wise idea. Here are a couple of things to look for and keep in mind when setting up your piano lab. If your plan is carefully thought-out, things should move along smoothly.

- **Room size:** we can't stress enough how accurate this needs to be. Measure 5 times if you have to. Most companies require an exact measurement before you order anyway but the last thing you want is too much equipment that won't fit into the allotted space.
- **Headphones:** with daily use, headsets will likely last about 6 months before an issue arises. The microphone may stop working or students will only be able to hear on one side. Since replacing headphones can be costly, it's a good idea to order an extra set for each workstation. This allows you to always have a spare available when a broken headset needs to be repaired.
- **Headphone box replacement:** individual student headphone boxes are standard with lab conferencing systems. While they are made to last for a very long time, sometimes one can go on the fritz. Order a few extra of these to have on hand when one needs to be replaced.
- **Warranties:** your conferencing system and keyboard should come with a standard 1 year warranty. Should problems occur within or even outside that period of time, always use a qualified repair center. Roland and Yamaha each have authorized repair shops in larger cities. If your school is located in a rural community, it's a good idea to keep some of the boxes from each piece of equipment as you may have to ship your gear back to the company to be repaired.

GROUP TEACHING TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

- Being organized is a must when teaching in your classroom piano lab setting. You'll be dealing with various skill levels so you'll have to come up with individual or group lesson plans that will keep all students engaged and motivated, as well as strengthen their learning experiences.
- Choosing one age group or skill level is optimum when teaching in classrooms but that isn't always possible, especially in elementary and secondary schools. Some children won't even be able to read music while others can play difficult repertory. A teacher conferencing system, as mentioned above, is a great investment that will allow you to speak, teach or listen to your students' progress either individually or as a group.
- Finding materials that are tailored to group instruction will be very helpful and convenient when planning daily lessons.
- Try partnering advanced students with beginners for part of the lesson. This helps with reinforcing concepts and practice techniques, teaches patience and helps to develop confidence.
- Pair same-level students together. This option provides both individuals with a built-in duet partner while giving them a sense of accountability to be prepared and properly practice for weekly lessons.