

Growing Your String Program

A Guide to Recruiting Beginning String Players



Musical Innovations

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Growing Your String Program

In the 1980's and 1990's, many school districts nationwide made the decision to remove beginning string classes from elementary schools and not begin string instruction until middle school. Since that time, string programs in our middle and high schools have suffered greatly. The South Carolina Coalition for Music Education is planning to embark on a large-scale recruiting project, and with elementary music teachers and string teachers around the state working together, to see an increase in our 6th grade beginning string enrollment of **100%** statewide for the coming school year. We believe this is not only a reasonable, but also a very attainable goal.

In order for this to become a reality, though, we are asking your help. Time is short, as sixth graders are asked to choose between the various arts classes available for next year, and to make a commitment to one class or another **by the end of February** [In most of our middle schools, students and parents still have the ability to make schedule changes until mid-August, but there is a good deal of pressure on rising sixth graders and parents for decisions to be made before March 1st].

However, without the help and encouragement of their elementary music teachers, few fifth graders would have adequate exposure to what participation in orchestral music is all about, or enough understanding of the benefits of participating in string class to make an educated choice.

The enclosed projects and handouts are designed to help elementary music teachers give their fifth graders an introduction to our school string programs, and to playing in orchestra . . . without taking up much of your class time. These are proven recruiting tools and ideas, and we hope you will find time in your schedules to include at least one or two of these activities in your curriculum in the next few weeks, and/or send at least one or two of the handouts home with each of your fifth graders (whether or not they verbalize an interest in participating in strings next year). In fact, our hope is that you will be able to send at least one handout home a week for the next several weeks, so that parents have repeated exposure to the potential experience that awaits their child in strings class.

Please also feel free to utilize the wonderful tools available online for music advocacy, which you can find at www.supportmusic.com, www.amc-music.com, www.music-for-all.org, and other similar sites. Even simply inserting in each concert program or parent newsletter a one-sentence pro-music education statement, along with one research fact supporting music education, can help bring visibility to your program and reinforce the value of music study.

We thank you in advance for your cooperation; please feel free to contact me at any time if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Tracy Leenman
Chairman, SC Coalition for Music Education
teleenman@bellsouth.net
(864) 979-5931

“Join the Orchestra” Poster Contest

One of the most effective ways to foster excitement about joining the orchestra is through a poster contest. Students in fifth grade are each encouraged to make a poster on the “Join the Orchestra” theme, containing at least one of the four members of the string family (see below). Any students who wish to enter may do so, provided posters are original and not computer-generated. Posters are then hung up (somewhere visible) in the school for the next PTA meeting, at which time, winners are recognized and awarded their prizes.

The best part of the contest is that, by picturing themselves a part of orchestra, students who participate will be recruiting themselves right into next year’s string classes! Meanwhile, you will undoubtedly have some beautifully creative artwork to hang up at your next PTA meeting, helping create added visibility for your school music program and for the district’s string programs as well. Posters can be made at home; or with the cooperation of your school’s classroom and/or art teachers, during art or other classroom time at school.

Below you will find a sample letter that can be adapted to suit your needs and handed out to all the fifth grade students in your school. Once you set the submission date, you can ask your school’s art teacher, administrator(s) or others to judge the contest (usually a group of 2 – 3 judges is best) - make sure the winners are honored at the next PTA meeting, so all the parents attending can see the posters, see the excitement, and join in congratulating the winners.

You can obtain prizes (*Musical Innovations* gift cards, \$10 for the First Prize winner and \$5 for each of two Second Prize winners) by contacting Tracy Leenman, (864) 979-5931 or at teleenman@bellsouth.net.

THE ORCHESTRA NEEDS YOU! . . .

. . . to make a poster for our annual "**Join the Orchestra**" Poster Contest. We hope that each fifth grader will make a poster, with a "Join the Orchestra" theme, which we can display for the parents at the next PTA meeting on _____ evening, _____.

Posters should be no larger than one sheet of poster board (24" X 30"), and should be done by the student with little or no parental assistance. You may want to do a poster with a friend, though. Each poster must include at least one of the four string instruments available to our sixth graders next year: violin, viola, cello or bass.

Posters will be judged on originality, use of the "**Join the Orchestra**" theme, use of color and materials, and neatness. One First Prize and two Second Prize winners will receive gift certificates to *Musical Innovations*, to be awarded at the PTA meeting on _____. All posters **MUST** be handed in to _____(your name, elementary music teacher)_____ by 2:30 p.m. on _____(date)_____. Please see _____(your name, elementary music teacher)_____ if you have any questions, and we look forward to seeing your artwork!

JOIN THE EXCITEMENT -- JOIN THE ORCHESTRA!

These are sample letters that can be sent home with students to generate discussion about and interest in joining strings next year. Sometimes, simply sending one letter home a week will encourage students and parents to talk about participation in music, and in strings in particular, over the course of the schedule-planning period. For those who might otherwise not have considered a music class for next year, or for those with limited exposure to the benefits of studying music, these letters are a very effective way of starting a dialog between student, parents, and you, the music educator. Please feel free to customize, edit and reproduce them as needed.

Sample Letter #1

February 28, 2008

Dear Fifth Grade Parent:

Your child has recently been introduced to one of the most valued activities promoted by the Greenville County schools. String instrument instruction is available to all Greenville County students starting in the sixth grade. Over the next few weeks your child will have the opportunity to become further acquainted with our string program and faculty.

This letter is sent to you because you play a great part in making the decision regarding your child's participation in this program. We hope you will discuss the program with your child as he/she learns about participating in string class in general music, a demonstration of orchestra instruments and/or an orientation concert by current orchestra students. More specific information regarding enrollment will be sent home with your child later, but most middle schools would like their rising sixth graders to choose their classes for next year, at least tentatively, no later than March 1st.

We urge you to consider carefully the enrollment of your child in orchestra, for it may lead to educational possibilities for your child that might otherwise remain undeveloped. There is a growing body of research that shows that studying music in school is of tremendous benefit to every child, and we are eager for your child to begin to experience those benefits as well.

Thank you for considering strings for your child in middle school; we look forward to answering any questions you may have about music education in the Greenville County Schools.

Sincerely,

Elementary Music Specialist
XXX Elementary School

Sample Letter #2

This letters can be sent home with students to organize a “string night” at your school; or at one school in cooperation with several other elementary schools in that area. Suggested talking points for this type of event are attached, below. If you want to have a “Strings Night” at your school, or to organize one with a group of other schools, please contact Tracy Leenman for information about instrument demonstrations and an instrument “petting zoo” that will allow the children to try out instruments, and be sized for the instrument(s) of their choice. If your school is not available for this type of event, you can schedule an evening for your students at Pecknel Music’s Greenville store; again, please contact Tracy at 979-5931 or tracy@pecknelmusic.com to set up your special event!

CONGRATULATIONS!

Your child has been invited to participate in the beginning strings program next year in middle school. He was chosen based upon the recommendation of his teacher, his scholastic ability, and his expressed desire to join the sixth grade orchestra next year.

Because your child possesses those qualities necessary for a good strings student, we would like to place your child in our beginning strings class. We want our strings program to continue being the *best*; therefore, we need the *best* students. **We need your child!!**

Participation in orchestra . . .

- develops social skills and the ability to work with others.

- improves communication.

- develops mental and physical coordination

- develops self-confidence, and a sense of accomplishment.

- develops responsibility and self-discipline.

- develops learning skills needed for success in every other academic subject.

We hope you will join us for a special informational meeting for all parents of students interested in participating in strings class for next year, on _____ (date) _____. This meeting will be held at _____ (time) _____ in the elementary music classroom at school. At that time, we will be meeting with all parents of interested fifth graders, and giving you information regarding the district’s string program policies, sign-up procedures for beginning strings, and an opportunity for your child to hear, hold, and play all four of the instruments available in beginning string class (violin, viola, cello and string bass). Refreshments will be served. Also, the winners of our annual "**Join the Orchestra**" Poster Contest will be announced, and prizes handed out.

We hope to see each and every one of you on the 15th -- we look forward to meeting you, and to answering any questions you may have regarding the strings programs in Greenville County. And we look forward to seeing your child begin his musical adventure in string class next fall! If I can be of any further assistance, or answer any of your questions, please feel free to call me at _____ (phone) _____.

Musically yours,

Elementary Music Specialist

Talking Points for a Successful Parent Meeting

- 1) Keep your part of the meeting short and sweet! (Choose from the following)
 - a. Congratulate parents and students on choosing music for their child!
 - i. Music makes you smarter!
 1. Develop a life long love of music
 2. Learn to express themselves through the art of music
 3. Builds social skills
 4. Time management
 5. Positive use of time
 6. Use lots of handouts on the benefits of music
 - a. You can find these at www.amc-music.com, www.supportmusic.com, www.music-for-all.com, and many other advocacy web sites, or through your local school music retailer.
 - ii. What happened to get to this point?
 1. Activities in elementary music classes
 2. Instrument demos
 3. Students expressed interest in string orchestra
 4. Instrument testing and sizing
 - iii. What happens in the future?
 1. Summer camps available through local music dealers
 2. In the fall – joining strings class
 3. Rehearsals - expectations
 4. Concerts – scheduled events
 5. Homework (practice!) (music is hard work and dedication)
 - iv. What do you need to get started?
 1. A quality instrument, one that is the correct size for your child
 2. Care kit, folding stand (for home use) and textbook (method book)
 3. Rock stop or shoulder rest (depending on the instrument)
 4. A pencil, and any other supplies required by the teacher(s)
 - b. Being successful in strings requires a PARTNERSHIP - between students, parents, director and your local school music dealer
 - i. What to look for in a school music retailer:
 1. Friendly, knowledgeable salespeople
 2. Guaranteed repairs by a certified technician, loaners available
 3. Director recommended brands and models vs. alternative sources
 4. Return privilege
 5. Maintenance and replacement coverages
 6. Ability to move up to the next size(s) as necessary
 - ii. Why you should not buy an instrument on line, or from a discount store?

Sample Letter #3

Dear parents of _____ (child) _____,

In the fall, your child will have the opportunity to begin learning to play a stringed instrument and become part of his/her school's orchestra program. Recently, he/she participated in a strings orientation program, and expressed interest in learning to play the (instrument)____. We hope you will encourage your child to be a part of this outstanding group at his middle school.

Music is an important part of your child's education. Music develops creativity. Music builds self-confidence and adds to social development. Last but not least, music is **FUN**. I'm sure your child will find all this to be true when class begins next fall.

If you would like for your child to participate in the 6th grade beginning strings program next year, please return this form within the next five days. Please **DO NOT OBTAIN AN INSTRUMENT AT THIS TIME**; when classes begin, his/her strings teacher will have more information on securing an instrument for each student in orchestra. If you have any questions concerning the strings programs in Greenville County, please feel free to call me at any time.

Musically yours,

Elementary Music Specialist

PLEASE DETACH AND RETURN IMMEDIATELY

Check one:

_____ I would like my child to enroll in beginning strings class for next school year.

_____ I am interested, but would like to know more. Please call me at _____,
or e-mail me at _____.

_____ I am not interested in strings for my child at this time.

Parents' Names _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Student's Name _____

Middle School (Fall '08) _____

Sample Letter #4

Helping Your Child Succeed in Strings Class

What can you do to help your child succeed in strings class? So many parents wonder if their child will have “enough” musical talent to succeed, or if he/she will “stick with it;” the good news is that *all* children are inherently musical, and *every* child has the potential to enjoy and to benefit from participating in strings! But, every child also needs encouragement and support from his/her family members in order to have the best possible experience in strings. Here is what will be expected of you and your child next year in strings class. Please review this with your child, and

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

As a *student* in a Greenville County Sixth Grade Strings Class, you will be asked to do the following:

- ♪ Abide by the classroom rules set by your teacher.
- ♪ Be consistent and diligent in doing your homework (children in strings class have twenty minutes of homework – or practicing – each night, which counts significantly towards their grade each nine weeks).
- ♪ Come prepared for class each day, with your instrument, your textbook, any required supplies, and a pencil (every good musician must have a pencil!).
- ♪ Maintain a positive attitude toward your strings teacher, fellow orchestra members, and orchestra rehearsals.
- ♪ Talk with your strings teacher regularly about your expectations and achievements.

PARENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Parental involvement is vital to a child's success in music. It is important that you show sustained interest in your child's musical growth by praising his accomplishments and achievements, and encouraging him through the tough parts of his musical study. It is important that your child do his homework each night and come prepared for class each day.

Gentle encouragement is needed, both in the classroom and at home, if your child is to succeed. Learning music is a try-and-try-again process and successes are extremely important. Your child might become discouraged one day. It's normal. At this point, let your child know you're aware of the problem and that you are prepared to help him through it.

Parents also have a vital role in the development of good practice habits. Please set aside a regularly scheduled time for your child to do his/her homework without interruption. We believe that communication between you, the parents, and your child's instructor is extremely important. At any indication of an unwillingness to practice, or of any other problem, please contact your child's teacher.

Parental attitude can have a significant effect on the outcome of a child's musical education. By supporting every aspect of your child's music study, you can be sure he will attain the maximum musical growth and enjoyment possible. Give your child your support, and we'll take it from there!

Should you desire more information, please call us at any time; we're here to help!

SIX KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE

In order to succeed in playing a musical instrument, you will need to develop good homework habits. Homework – for the musician, this is called “practice” - is essential to learning music; the more you practice, the more quickly you will grow as a musician. We strongly recommend a **minimum** of twenty to thirty minutes of practice a day, five days a week. Beginning students will be given more specific practice instructions over the first few weeks of lessons.

Please set aside a regularly scheduled time for homework each day. Strings homework should be done just as any other homework, for strings class is a credit-bearing academic subject whose grade counts towards your student’s GPA just like any other academic subject. Do not leave practicing to chance, or wait until you have some “free time.” Especially for beginners, several short practice periods per day may be more effective than one longer one. At times, the going may get rough, and you may get discouraged, but this is normal. If you will persevere through the tough times, you will experience the tremendous satisfaction that comes with achieving your goals.

You will hear the term “self-discipline” used many times during the course of your class. Unless classes are followed up with thorough and well-planned practice periods, little or no progress will be made. Whether you are taking strings strictly for pleasure or as a serious student, we hope you will attempt to get the most out of your classes as well as your practice times. Here are a few suggestions which, if carefully followed, will produce results, without fail!

1. Practice slowly and carefully, thinking constantly of what you are trying to accomplish. Concentrate on the work at hand, and avoid automatic practice.
2. Practice short sections of a song at a time. Practice fingering first, then bowing or plucking along with the fingering.
3. Repeat each difficult part in the music until it can be played three times in a row correctly (once is accidental, twice is coincidental, three times is mastery). Merely playing one’s music through once does not constitute practicing.
4. Incorporate the proper rhythm, fingering, phrasing, articulation and dynamics in your practice from the very first time you play a piece. Playing the correct notes is only a very small part of learning music.
5. A few minutes of thorough practice are worth hours of haphazard, careless work. You’ve heard it said that “practice makes perfect;” the truth is that only **perfect practice makes perfect**.
6. Consider investing in a *SmartMusic* program for your computer. This interactive program makes practicing much more enjoyable, but also much more effective, as students are given immediate feedback on their playing, and the resources they need to ensure they are playing correctly.
7. Remember, no question you might have is unimportant. That’s why you take lessons! Communication between student and instructor is essential to learning.

Both your class periods and your practice periods will be enjoyable if you see that you are constantly making progress. Please understand that your rate of progress will be in direct relation to how diligently and consistently you do your homework. If you have any questions or concerns, please let us know. We’re here to help!

Sample Letter #5

How will your child benefit from learning to read and play music?

Music is a Science - It is exact and specific. It demands exact acoustics. A conductor's score is a chart, a graph that indicates frequencies, intensities, volume changes, melody and harmony all at once with the most exact control of time.

Music is Mathematical - Music is rhythmically based on the subdivisions of time into fractions, which must be done instantaneously, not worked out on paper.

Music is a Foreign Language - Most of the terms are in Italian, German or French and the notation is certainly not English - but a highly developed kind of shorthand that uses symbols to represent ideas. The semantics of music is the most complete and universal language.

Music is History - Music usually reflects the environment and the times of its creation, often even the country and / or racial feeling.

Music is Physical Education - It requires fantastic coordination of fingers, hands, arms and muscles which respond instantly to the sound the ear hears, and the mind interprets.

Music is All These Things, but Most of All, Music is Art - It allows a human being to take all these dry, technically boring (however, difficult) techniques and use them to create emotion. That is the one thing science cannot duplicate. It allows you to be human, to recognize beauty and to be sensitive.

Did you know?

- ♪ Skilled musicians have an area of the brain that is up to 25% larger than those who have never played an instrument.
- ♪ Scientists have found a link between the age at which a person starts learning an instrument and the size of the musical area of the brain.
- ♪ Research shows that repeated exposures to complex music induce improved spatial-temporal learning.
- ♪ Music students continue to outperform their non-arts peers on the SAT, according to the most recent "Profiles of SAT and Achievement Test Takers."
- ♪ Students in music performance scored 52 points higher on the verbal portion of the SAT and 36 points higher on the math portion than students with no arts participation.
- ♪ "There seems to be a high correlation between musical ability and reasoning skills. It has to do with recognizing and manipulating patterns. That happens in music and in computer programming." - Skwarek
- ♪ The basic nature of people can be found in their songs, images, dances and stories. To be illiterate in the arts is to be blind, mute and deaf at a most fundamental level.
- ♪ The study of music and art makes us disciplined and civilized.
- ♪ The arts demand high standards, analytical thinking, creative thinking, practice, discipline, teamwork, and follow through - all qualities that employers say they need in workers.
- ♪ "The arts are an essential element of education, just like reading, writing, and arithmetic...music, dance, painting and theater are keys that unlock profound human understanding and accomplishment".
-Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett

Sample Letter #6

DID YOU KNOW . . .

Music can and does play an important part in the lives of people. Each and every one of us has a natural musical interest and ability. This means that anyone can learn and benefit from the study of music! There is musical potential in every individual that, like all potential, should be developed to its fullest.

Today, in America, there is a tremendous need to reach out to our young people, and including music in their lives is an effective way of doing so. Music is a dominant force in American life; it connects us to our history, our traditions and our heritage. Certainly, without music, children are denied something that can greatly enrich their lives.

THE STUDY OF MUSIC STRENGTHENS THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIND AND BODY

Music is a uniquely powerful means of involving and integrating the activities of both the right and left halves of the brain, combining the rational and the aesthetic.

There is a proven correlation between musical study and

- muscular development -- this improves a child's small-motor coordination, hand-eye coordination, and overall physical coordination.
- increased listening ability -- this results in an increase in attention span, concentration, and long- and short-term memory.
- increased primary mental abilities (verbal, perceptual, number and spatial) -- this sharpens a child's sensitivity and analytical skills.

Music education contributes in a unique way to a child's creative development, as it

- promotes body awareness
- makes each student aware of his innate creative potential
- helps each student to develop his aesthetic potential to the fullest
- provides an outlet for imagination and self-expression.

Because music provides an opportunity for participation and success for all students, all music students can experience the joy of aesthetic expression.

THE STUDY OF MUSIC AIDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VARIETY OF ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL SKILLS

Music education develops habits of discipline and responsibility which are reflected in other subjects; in short, music helps your child *learn how to learn*.

Music instills in students the values of self-discipline and commitment. Children who participate in music learn to work cooperatively toward shared goals. As they participate in the gratification of work shared and challenges met, they gain confidence and a sense of accomplishment.

As a child develops musical intelligence, he

- learns to understand and use symbols in new contexts
- learns critical thinking skills and learn to use problem-solving skills
- learns effective communication skills
- develops social skills and the ability to work with others

**THE STUDY OF MUSIC HAS A SIGNIFICANT BENEFICIAL EFFECT
ON MANY OTHER ASPECTS OF LIFE**

Music is vital to our children's education for its aesthetic, historical, and cultural value. It provides an aesthetic counterbalance to the pressures of our highly technological society. It is an important part of our cultural heritage. It provides a constructive use for leisure time.

Participation in a musical ensemble gives students a first-hand lesson in citizenship. As part of a performing group, a child learns

- to work together in an atmosphere of peace, friendship, trust, cooperation and harmony
- to be willing to discipline and accommodate his individuality to the needs and concerns of the group, for the benefit of all the group's members
- to play his proper role in an organization
- to respond enthusiastically to leadership
- to contribute wholeheartedly, knowing that the end result will be a far richer experience than an individual can achieve on his own.

***What can you do to encourage your child's love of music
and further his musical talents?***

Your support is *essential* to your child's music education. Here's what you can do:

1. Make music an important part of your child's environment; encourage him to be a music lover and a music maker.
2. Encourage your children to participate in general music classes and school choral and instrumental ensembles; encourage and direct your child in the choice of age-appropriate instruments.
3. Attend quality musical events with your family, to expand your children's interest in music. Listen to programs and recordings at home.
4. Encourage your child to perform for you and for others, and to make music with others whenever possible. Give him sincere and frequent praise.
5. Consider private musical study for your child -- nothing compares to one-on-one instruction!
6. Do not hesitate to consult us if we can be of any assistance in making music a more vital part of your home.

You can help your child build a relationship with music that will give satisfaction and personal growth during his school years and throughout life. Music study for your child represents an investment on your part, but it is an investment that pays lifelong dividends!

. . . MUSIC CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Frequently Asked Questions About Strings . . .

What are the goals of the string/orchestra music program in our district?

It is the goal of the directors to encourage and promote music literacy as well as music appreciation within young people so that they will be musically enhanced throughout the remainder of their lives. Every child who desires to join is able to participate in beginning strings class; there are no prerequisites or requirements for previous musical training.

How much time is involved in participating?

Participation in the orchestra program at the middle school level takes place during the school day. Students are expected to practice an average of twenty minutes daily; this is their **homework**, just as they have homework in every other credit-bearing, academic class. Some students can get their daily practice time completed before school, or after school, as well as at home. Occasionally, an extra rehearsal is scheduled for a string class; however, these instances are quite infrequent.

When do the groups perform?

The orchestras perform for various school events (i.e. PTA meetings), Winter Concert, and a Spring Concert. Other opportunities vary from year to year, and may include Concert Festival (the state-wide assessment component of our strings program) and Solo and Ensemble Festival. Those students whose progress well enough are encouraged to audition for All-State, Region and All-County Orchestra, but these activities are not required.

Can my child be in both sports and orchestra?

YES! Many middle school string students are also involved in sports, student council, youth groups, and other activities. All students are encouraged to PARTICIPATE in their own education. The directors, coaches and other advisors will work together to resolve schedule conflicts when they arise.

How do we get an instrument?

New and used instruments are available through rent-to-own and lease programs at the various school music retailers in our area. We strongly encourage you rent or lease a good quality instrument through one of these companies, as they offer the brands and models we prefer the children use in the program. Often, less expensive instruments (e.g. those purchased from catalogs, or on line, or from non-music stores) are not really “less expensive” in the long run, as parts may not be readily available, and they may spend more time in the repair shop than in your student’s hands. Most companies who rent or lease instruments make provisions for return of the instrument (or exchange for a different string instrument) should your child change his/her mind, so you can obtain a string instrument for your child risk-free.

What do I do if we already own an instrument?

Bring it to a certified repair technician at one of our local school music retailers, so he/she can check to make sure it is in good working condition. If it is not, the technicians can offer advice regarding repair. It is also essential that the instrument is the proper size for your child, so that he or she does not experience discomfort while practicing from an instrument that is too small or too large.

What instruments may my child choose to play?

Each school will start students on violin, viola, cello and string bass. However, there is a limit to the number of people that can play each type of instrument. So, please be sure your child tries all four instruments, and is measured by one of our string teachers or by a representative of one of our school music dealers before choosing which one he/she wants. Some local music stores offer week-long summer camps that give children an opportunity to play all four instruments and choose the one they like best.

A SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS GUIDING THE PURCHASE OF AN INSTRUMENT:

There are many places to buy a musical instrument including department stores, catalogs, internet sites, private individuals and wholesale clubs. Many times, these non-school music stores will offer what seem like very inexpensive instruments. With some of these instruments, there is no after-sale support, no repair service or a direct working relationship with the manufacturer; and the instruments are typically of low quality. The results when purchasing from a non-school music type of source are often frustrated students and higher long-term costs for the parents. We recommend renting or purchasing an instrument from a store that specializes in school music service.

When you are ready to rent or purchase an instrument, here are a few "pointers" to help you choose a good quality instrument.

- ***Musical instruments are NOT toys!***

A usable instrument is a well-constructed work of art, combining both the latest technology and time-tested old-world craftsmanship.

- ***Watch out for internet auction sites!***

Often, students/parents who purchase instruments from auction sites end up frustrated due to the poor quality of the instrument or because the instrument is in need of serious repair. Not all manufacturers build instruments according to specific standards with up to date technology. Most school music stores offer only quality brand name instruments that directors prefer.

- ***Play the instrument before you buy it!***

This will not be easy with internet/catalog companies. It will cost more in shipping and restocking fees than if you went to a local school music store.

- ***Get a major, national brand-name instrument.***

Do not waste your time on unknown instrument brands. Non-brand name instrument manufacturers often do not make parts available to repair centers. Therefore, locate a good name brand from your teacher or local school music store.

- ***An inexpensive instrument can be a waste of time and money.***

Not all instruments are created equal! Cheap instruments are usually just that, cheap. If you purchase a "questionable" instrument, you may spend more on repair just to make it usable. Some brands of instruments manufactured offshore or even domestically cannot be supported with critical parts for proper maintenance and repair.

- ***Don't be afraid of school music store salespeople.***

These people can be a great resource. They are typically professionally trained and often work hand in hand with us and some make regular visits to the school. For the best advice on stringed instruments, find a local music store that deals with strings often, not just as a side venture.

- ***Consider the value of service after you have purchased.***

Repair is an inevitable fact. Alternative sources often do not offer maintenance or replacement programs. Most school music stores offer maintenance and replacement programs as part of their rental/purchase plans. Usually, the cost is nominal and is well worth the small expense. Remember, it is a matter of "WHEN" not "IF" an instrument in regards to repair and service.

If you have any questions or concerns or would like my input on which instruments are proper and suitable, please contact the strings teacher at your child's school.

Is it Really a Violin? Or Is it Only a VSO? (a “Violin-Shaped Object”)

A Parents’ Check List

We’re very excited that your child is considering joining his school string program! And we want to be sure he has the best possible chance to succeed in strings. Unfortunately, we have recently seen young people attempt to learn to play on instruments that are of such inferior quality that the children cannot possibly learn.

Bargain hunters are finding inexpensive instruments on the Internet, in discount stores, and in some catalogs. Sadly, these instruments are *not* bargains. While the price may *look* right, the “real” cost of this instrument may be in costly repairs, poor durability, poor tone, or worst of all, a student who is not able to succeed in string class.

We want to help you be able to distinguish a “real” violin from a “VSO,” a violin-shaped object that looks like a violin. A violin will give your child many years of fun and enjoyment, while a VSO may only lead to student and teacher frustration, wasted family expense, and worst of all, a student who has lost an opportunity to become a lifelong music maker. Here is a very simple checklist you can use to determine whether the instrument you want to buy is a “real” violin, or a VSO:

1. The Pegs – provide easy, stable tuning.

Do the pegs work smoothly? Hold properly?

Look for 360° contact on all pegs at both points of contact with the instrument.

2. The Nut – provides for proper placement of the strings.

The nut should be the height of a business card off the fingerboard.

Is there string damage at the nut?

3. The Neck and Fingerboard – provide a durable playing surface, buzz-free sound.

Lightly pull up on bottom of fingerboard – is it loose?

Look down the fingerboard: are both sides evenly spaced between the f-holes?

Measure from the nut to the bridge – is it 325 – 327mm? **

The fingerboard should have a scoop, but only a very little; and should not be wavy.

If you hold a string down just below the nut & at the end it should make noise when tapped.

** A music dealer who sells string instruments should have what’s called a Mensur tool that you can use to measure different parts of a violin.

4. The Bridge – provides for proper string height and spacing.

Is the bridge positioned between the nicks of the f-holes?

Is the back of the bridge perpendicular to the top of the instrument?

Correctly positioned, the feet of the bridge will be flush with the top.

Are the grooves in the bridge too deep, so that they cause string damage?

Is there a protector on the e-string at the bridge?

If someone tunes your violin or changes a string for you, make sure he or she checks the bridge afterwards!

5. The Top and Back – provide for soundness of body, proper sound.

Are there any cracks in the instrument?

Feel under the bottom of strings – is there a “soundpost crack?”

Is there any varnish damage?

Is the top spruce? Is it “solid carved?” Where was it grown?

Quality of the wood used is one of the most important aspects of string instrument construction.

Is the bottom maple? Where was it grown?

While flamed maple is 5 – 10 times more expensive than unflamed, it is more brittle, and not always of better quality. Neither is a one-piece back always better than a two-piece.

The top should be about 3.2mm thick at the f-holes, and the “tap-tones” of the top and bottom should match. Ask your local school music dealer to demonstrate the instrument’s tap-tones.

6. The Soundpost – provides support, transmits sound to the back of the instrument.

Look in the f-hole -- is the soundpost right behind the foot of the bridge?

A soundpost should only be re-set by a certified repairman.

7. The Adjusters (“fine tuners”) – provide tuning ease.

Are any adjusters loose? Do the screws move easily?

Are any so tight that they touch the instrument?

8. The Chinrest – provides safe, secure and proper hold for the player.

Is it loose or broken?

Does the part that cradles the chin touch the instrument or tailpiece?

Is there a cork on the bottom to protect the bottom of the instrument?

9. The End Button and Endpin

Is the end button (violin & viola only) centered in the end block?

Is the button made of ebony?

Is the button held firmly in the hole? Are there cracks around the bottom?

Does the endpin (cello & bass only) moves easily? Is it bent?

Does the screw hold adequately (cello & bass only, again)?

Remember, each violin is made of between 70 and 76 parts, and each part is an opportunity for the manufacturer to take a short cut! We know you want to give your child the best possible start in strings, and so do we. So, **if you have purchased an “eBayolin” or other VSO, some of our local school music retailers may be willing to exchange it and give you full credit towards one of our teacher-approved instruments; just ask your local music store representative!**