

Grade Starts & Scheduling Practices:

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Recommended vs Actual

Opportunities
in Beginning
String
Programs

Successful school string programs often have high-quality beginning programs. In the development of beginning programs, string teachers consider issues such as appropriate grade levels to begin instruction, the relationship of grade levels between beginning strings and beginning band, scheduling string instruction, and the amount of available contact time in which to teach.

Several professional resources provide recommendations about these issues. The recommendations, however, raise a question: To what degree do professional recommendations coincide with actual practice? A *National Study of Beginning Band and Orchestra Programs* was conducted in 1997 to provide insight about this question.¹

Recommended Grade Starts

MENC: The National Association for Music Education (MENC), in its *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction*, recommends that string instruction should begin no later than fourth grade.² Similar recommendations were made during the first part of the century by Joseph E. Maddy and Thaddeus P. Giddings in their book *Instrumental Technique for Orchestra and Band*: "Classes in orchestral instruments should be organized as early as pupils are able to read music in the singing classes, and large enough to handle the various instruments. This, of course, varies with the different instruments, but the fourth or fifth grade should surely be late enough to start these."³

MENC's *The Complete String Guide* suggests that beginning strings should be offered no later than sixth grade.⁴ In *Guide to Teaching Strings*, Norman Lamb recommends that recruitment for the elementary string program should begin by the fourth grade.⁵ Lamb further states that if age is used as a criterion, nine seems to be a reasonable age for most students to begin instruction.

While these recommendations are specific to string instruction, some education leaders combine strings and band into one group for their recommendations. In *The Teaching of Instrumental Music*, Richard Colwell and Thomas Goolsby state that students can successfully begin instrumental instruction "when eight or nine years of age, and most are ready by fourth grade."⁶ In fact, according to these authors, "the best time to start instrumental music is in the fourth grade."

Actual Grade Starts

In a study published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* (JRME) titled "The Status of Orchestra Programs in the Public Schools," Robert Gillespie and Donald Hamann report that most beginning string classes occur in grades four, five, and six.⁷ The 1997 *National Study of Beginning Band and Orchestra Programs* (hereafter referred to as the 1997 Study) generally supports these findings. For districts that offered string programs, four grade levels were found to compose 95 percent of all reported grade starts: 40 percent of programs begin strings in fourth grade, 26 percent begin in fifth grade, 18 percent begin in third grade, and 11 percent begin in sixth grade. (See Table 1.)

1 In what grade do string programs begin?

Grade Level	Number/Percentage of Districts
3rd grade	18
4th grade	40
5th grade	26
6th grade	11
7th grade	0
Other	05 Total 100

100 orchestras responded; therefore, the number and percentage of districts are the same.

While the majority of school districts with string programs did follow MENC's suggestion to offer strings beginning in the fourth grade, more than one-third of the programs surveyed in the 1997 Study did not. Geographic regions provide additional information, illustrating different approaches to string starts. (See Table 2.)

2 Geographic Breakdowns of Grade Starts

	% Districts 3rd Grade	% Districts 4th Grade	% Districts 5th Grade	% Districts 6th Grade	% Districts Other
Northwest	42.4	42.4	6.1	3	6.1
Midwest	6.3	50	34.4	9.4	0
South	0	12.5	43.8	31.3	12.5
West	10.5	42.1	31.6	10.5	5.3

Actual vs. Recommended Grade Starts

Most programs in the Northeast reflect MENC's *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards* recommendation to begin strings by fourth grade. Many other programs—notably those in the South—do not. Many successful string programs across the United States begin string instruction in fifth grade or later. The fourth-grade start recommendation by MENC may be appropriate for some

string programs; it should not, however, be considered the standard for all programs. Other variables (such as those discussed later) should be considered when determining an appropriate grade to begin instruction.

Recommendations About Starting Strings Earlier Than Band

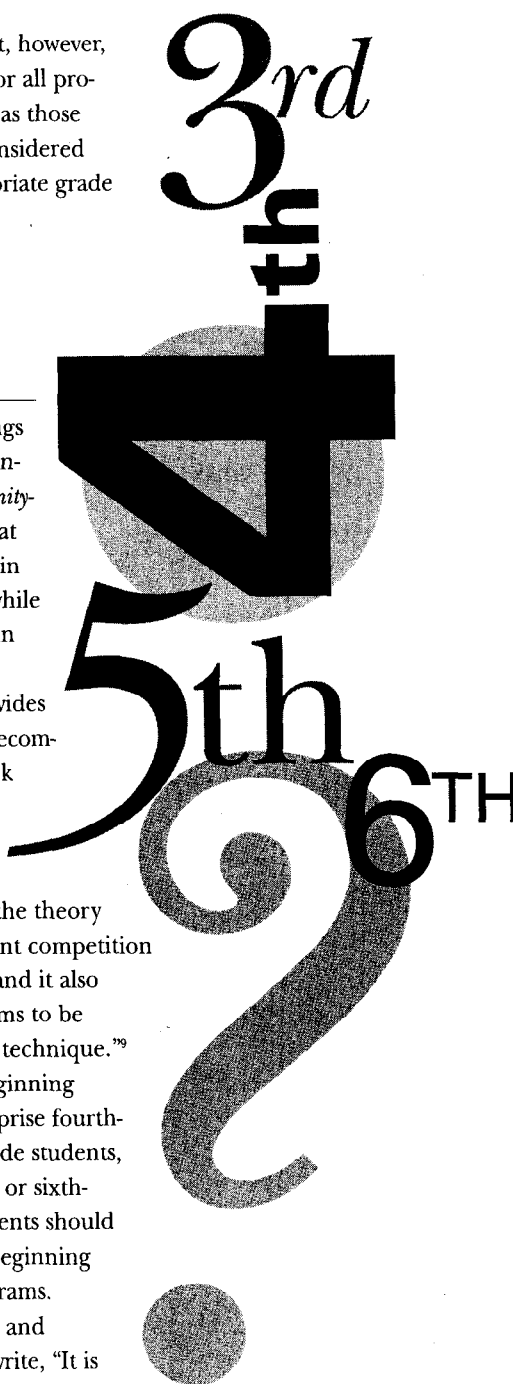
When should beginning strings be offered in relation to beginning band? MENC's *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards* suggests that string instruction should begin no later than fourth grade, while band instruction should begin no later than fifth.⁸

Student recruitment provides a focus for some grade-start recommendations. In his 1965 book *Instrumental Music for Today's Schools*, Robert House states, "The string program is often given a year's head start on the theory that this eases the recruitment competition with the band instruments, and it also gives the extra time that seems to be required in acquiring string technique."⁹ House recommends that beginning string programs should comprise fourth-

or fifth-grade students, while fifth- or sixth-grade students should compose beginning band programs.

Maddy and Giddings write, "It is questionable whether bands should be organized in the sixth-grade

buildings. The orchestra should be stressed here to give it the needed start ahead of the more easily developed band."¹⁰ This rationale illustrates the thinking of some pedagogues from the early part of the century; the point, however, remains valid today. A beginning saxophone player may be able to learn a major scale early in his studies; a beginning string player, on the other hand, faces greater psychomotor demands and will take longer to develop similar skills.



In *Teaching Stringed Instruments in Classes*, Elizabeth A. H. Green agrees that mastery takes longer for strings compared to winds, but suggests that "strings are not harder to teach than winds. Whereas the problem of the beginning wind player is that of building range, note by note, the problem of the string novice is the bi-manual functioning of his hands, each doing a specialized type of work, but each having to correlate with the other so that while functioning individually they can also work effectively together."¹¹

Maddy and Giddings raise another point: "Pupils can play stringed instruments earlier than they can the larger wind instruments that balance up a band."¹² Because stringed instruments are available in fractional sizes, students can begin instruction at an earlier age compared to students who study wind instruments.

While House and MENC's *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards* promote different grade starts for strings and band, *The Complete String Guide* identifies three advantages for same grade-level starts.¹³ A potentially larger participation rate in the overall instrumental program may occur. Attrition from the instrumental program may be reduced. Finally, the negative string image that can result from students shifting from string instruction to band instruction may be eliminated.

Actual Practice: Starting Strings Before Band

Results from the 1997 Study indicate that among those school districts that offered both beginning string and band instruction, 39 percent of them did so at the same grade levels, while 49 percent offered strings one grade level before band, and 6 percent offered strings two grade-levels before band. Only 3 percent of the districts offered bands at an earlier grade level than strings. (See Table 3.)

3 Do Strings Begin Before Band?

	Percentage of Districts
Band/strings begin at same grade	39%
Strings start one grade earlier than band	49%
Strings start two grades earlier than band	6%
Band starts earlier than strings	3%

Starting Strings Before Band: Actual Practice vs. Recommendations

No single recommendation can be made in terms of when to start strings in relation to band. What is best for one district may not be ideal for another, given the variety of factors affecting the decision, such as staffing, available instructional time, scheduling practices, and facility demands.

Current practice suggests starting strings one year before band. If a teacher is following this practice and if attrition is minimal, the authors would recommend no change (adhering

to the adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"). On the other hand, consider the example of a teacher who starts strings one year before band and is only allowed to see her students one time a week. The teacher finds that her classes are frequently canceled, her students are not making good progress, and many students drop strings to start band. In this instance, she would be better off starting the same year as band, making sure to use effective recruitment techniques.

Recommendations for Pull-Out Scheduling

The expression *pull-out scheduling* is typically used to describe a practice where students are pulled from other classes or activities to receive music instruction. Few recommendations exist for such an approach to beginning string instruction. Colwell and Goolsby note, however, that elementary-level instrumental music programs often use a pull-out schedule.¹⁴

Actual Practice: Pull-Out Scheduling

Overall, results from the 1997 Study indicate that 74 percent of school districts with beginning string programs pulled students. Additional analysis reveals that among those districts that pulled for string instruction, 77 percent did so from academic classes. Results suggest that students were pulled from general music, recess, and lunch less often. The highest percentage of districts that pulled students for string instruction occurred in the Northeast at 97 percent; in the West, 74 percent of districts used pull-out scheduling; in the Midwest, 63 percent of districts pulled students; and in the South, 50 percent of districts used the practice. (See Table 4.)

4 Percentage of Districts that Use Pull-Out Scheduling

	Percentage of Districts
Northeast	97%
Midwest	63%
South	50%
West	74%

While regional differences provide additional insight into scheduling practices, pulling students for instruction may be more related to grade starts. The use of pull-out scheduling decreased as the grade level increased—regardless of regions. In other words, a greater percentage of students were pulled from fourth-grade programs than from sixth-grade programs. Music teachers who work in districts with instrumental programs that begin in sixth and seventh grade appear to have more regularly scheduled classes and thus greater control over their instructional period, compared to those teachers at earlier grade levels who have to pull or borrow students for music instruction.

Pull-Out Scheduling Concerns

Pull-out scheduling may damage relationships between string

teachers and regular classroom teachers. Such practices also provide an inconsistent means of access to students, when compared with classes assigned a regular place on the master calendar.

An often-cited concern focuses on student achievement in academic coursework because of lost class time. In a study published in *JRME* titled "Excusing Elementary School Students from Regular Classroom Activities for the Study of Instrumental Music," Edward Kvet reports that no significant difference exists in sixth-grade reading, language, and mathematics achievement between students who are pulled for instrumental music instruction from regular classes and those who do not participate in instrumental music.¹⁵ For string teachers who want to provide instruction at the elementary level, regardless of scheduling practices, this may help to reassure those concerned about achievement in the regular classroom.

Ideally, beginning strings would be a stand-alone class—one that has a dedicated block of instructional time. Regular scheduling is not always realistic, though, given the current organization of most elementary schools. Students who are pulled for string instruction often compose only a portion of the class from which they are pulled. Without some type of an elective system in place, a question is raised about what to do with students who are not involved in the string program. If string instruction is desired at the elementary level, pull-out scheduling will at least allow for student access.

Recommended Contact Time

The two cited MENC publications provide recommendations for the number of weekly instructional days—as well as the amount of overall instructional time during the week—necessary for beginning string instruction. The *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards* suggests that "instrumental classes meet at least two times per week for a total of at least ninety minutes, including individual instruction and work in small groups and large ensembles."¹⁶ The *Complete String Guide* states that a later grade start (such as sixth) is preferable if three to five contact days are available each week, compared to earlier grade levels (such as fourth or fifth) if only one or two contact days are available weekly.

Actual Contact Time

Results from the 1997 Study suggest that school districts typically offered one or two weekly meetings for beginning strings: 38 percent of the districts indicated two weekly meetings, while 37 percent indicated one. Eight percent of districts scheduled five weekly meetings for beginning strings. (See Table 5.)

5 Number of Weekly Meetings for Beginning Strings

	Percentage of Districts
Two weekly classes	38%
One weekly class	37%
Five weekly classes	8%
Two and a half weekly classes	5%
One and a half classes weekly	3%

Results further indicate that the number of weekly meetings increased as the grade levels increased. For string instruction, the most common number of weekly meetings was one for both third grade (61 percent) and fourth grade (48 percent) starts. Two weekly meetings were most common for fifth grade (62 percent), and five weekly meetings were most common for sixth grade (50 percent). (See Table 6 on the next page.)

As might be expected, given the corresponding increase of weekly class meetings, allotted instructional minutes increased as the grade levels increased. The most common

About the 1997 National Study of Beginning Band & Orchestra Programs

Conducted by Paul Doerksen and Judith Delzell

The 1997 *National Study of Beginning Band and Orchestra Programs* examined actual learning opportunities for beginning string and band programs—across the United States and by geographical regions. Of interest were a comparison between the recommended opportunities of the Music Educators National Conference and actual opportunities discerned from the study about starting grade levels, the practice of pull-out scheduling, and weekly meetings and instructional time. In addition, indications of instability for the starting grade levels of beginning strings and bands (including recent changes and possible future changes) were sought.

A random sampling of approximately 10 percent of public school districts across the United States (1,385 questionnaires) was made; respondents were asked to consider the typical beginning program in their school districts for both bands and orchestras. Results indicate that 18.0 percent of surveyed school districts offered string instruction, while 98.8 percent of districts offered band instruction. The string finding closely resembles that of Camille Smith, who found that 15.9 percent of U.S. school districts offered string programs. (See "Access to String Instruction in American Public Schools" in Volume 45/Winter 1997 of the *Journal of Research in Music Education*).

By regions, the lowest percentage of districts that offered string instruction was the Midwest (12.6 percent), followed by the South (14.8 percent), and the West (20.7 percent); Northeast districts indicated the highest percentage of offerings at 31.2 percent. One limitation of the study was a return rate of 41 percent. A replication of the study is anticipated, with the aim of a higher participation rate.

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6 Most Common Number of Weekly Classes by Grade Level

Grade Strings Begin	Most Common Number of Weekly Classes	Percentage of districts that begin in that grade that meet that number per week
3rd	1	61%
4th	1	48%
5th	2	62%
6th	5	50%
Other	0	0%

7 Most Common Amount of Weekly Instructional Time by Grade Level

Grade Strings Begin	Most Common Number of Weekly Instructional Time	Percentage of districts that begin in that grade that meet that amount of time
3rd	0 – 59 minutes	83%
4th	0 – 59 minutes	65%
5th	60 – 119 minutes	65%
6th	180 – 240 minutes	60%

time allotment for string instruction in third grade was under one hour (83 percent of school districts that started at that grade level). Of the districts that started strings in fourth grade, less than one hour continued to be the most common time allotment—though the percentage decreased to 65 percent. By the fifth grade, the most frequent amount of scheduled time for strings was one to two hours (65 percent of districts), while sixth-grade strings were most commonly allowed three to four hours (60 percent). (See Table 7.)

Recommended vs. Actual Contact Time

MENC calls for a minimum of two class meetings each week at the elementary level. Large portions of school districts across the United States apparently are not providing suggested learning opportunities in this regard. Of particular interest is the finding that beginning string programs in the third and fourth grade typically had fewer than sixty minutes of weekly instructional time (MENC recommends ninety minutes). Such limited contact time is exacerbated when classes are missed due to assemblies, holidays, snow days, and so forth.

Jacquelyn Dillon-Krass, 1996–98 ASTA president, commented, “A class that meets once per week for beginners is probably worse than no class at all. It would be better to wait to begin the program at a grade level in which it is possible to schedule the class at least twice a week if not more. Progress is simply not possible with once-a-week classes.”¹⁷

T. Dave Pugh, middle school orchestra teacher at Byron Center Public Schools in Michigan, agrees: “Meeting a few times a week at an earlier age may seem like a good thing, but how many students don’t continue because they are not getting the guided practice that daily meeting times offer? Many quit and figure they just can’t do it, even though they could if they had a little more time and help.”¹⁸

Longitudinal Research is Needed

Longitudinal data about learning opportunities for beginning string programs is lacking. As a result, trends in grade starts and scheduling practices are not always apparent. What is apparent, though, is a degree of variability in the recommended and actual learning opportunities associated with beginning strings. Ongoing research about such opportunities

may prove helpful for future recommendations offered by leaders in the profession, as well as in discussions about possible revisions to opportunity standards such as those published by MENC. Ø

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17. Fax correspondence with AST Editor Laura Racine, February 20, 2000.
18. Email correspondence with AST Editor Laura Racine, March 1, 2000.

String educators interested in a broader discussion of issues surrounding beginning instrumental music programs may want to review the 1998 article by Judith Delzell and Paul Doerksen, "Reconsidering the Grade Level for Beginning Instrumental Music," which appeared in UPDATE: Applications of Research in Music Education 16 (Spring-Summer 1998): 17-22.

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