

WAYZATA ELEMENTARY STRING PROGRAM: AN ORAL HISTORY

by Lynne Weber

For many years I worked as a librarian by day and a part-time Suzuki cello teacher after hours. In 1998 I had the opportunity to join the Wayzata Public Schools staff as a string teacher, working primarily with cello and bass students in the district's seven elementary schools. I was completely taken aback by the size and presence of the Wayzata program and immediately realized that it could benefit immensely by documentation—to record the history, assist others wishing to establish an in-school Suzuki program and, perhaps, help defend a school offering that often found itself under siege. In 29 interviews with teachers, parents, students and administrators I created a picture of an offering that served many district families very well for many years.

Independent School District 284, Wayzata Public Schools, Wayzata, Minnesota, offered string lessons to elementary children during the school day for almost forty years. Ted Hughart was recruited in 1963 to start elementary strings, which would feed an already existing string program in the secondary school. Mark Bjork came to the district in 1967, having been sought out in part because of his interest in the Suzuki method, already in use in a highly modified form in Wayzata. When Helen Loing and Barbara Lamb began teaching together, there was co-existence of traditional and Suzuki approaches, but unification into a modified Suzuki method occurred in the late seventies. The Wayzata Elementary String Program grew by leaps and bounds, flourished and boasted more than five hundred participants for many years

The Structure

Barb Lamb and Helen Loing give excellent descriptions of the program as it existed for

many years:

- Participation was open to all children, K through fifth grade.
- String lessons and the school orchestras were scheduled during the school day.
- String lessons were loosely based upon principles of the Suzuki Method.
 - Initial instruction was rote (finger number patterns were supplied for each piece for the adults).
 - There was strong emphasis upon establishing correct technique.
 - Note reading was usually introduced at the end of the first year of study.
 - Music listening was strongly encouraged.
 - Children came to lessons in groups, but within the group each child received a short private lesson.
 - Participants in kindergarten through



Curt Carlson enjoys an outdoor performance by Wayzata Suzuki string students. (c. mid 1970's)

- second grade were required to have an adult present for the school lesson.
- Children third grade and older were always permitted to participate without an adult in attendance at lessons.
- Beginning students were grouped homogeneously. Violins, cellos and basses were grouped in separate classes. Children were placed with other beginners in the same grade when

possible.

- Second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth-years students were grouped in classes by achievement level. Violins, cellos and basses continued to be grouped in separate classes.
- Orchestras at three levels—beginning, intermediate, advanced—existed at each of the elementary schools. String students did not enter orchestra until second grade and their second year of string lessons
- Required repertoire class was held before school, every other week, at each elementary school.
- All-district concerts were held twice each year (in later years these involved more than 500 students).
- Fees for beginner participation were minimal. The schools owned violins, violas, cellos and basses for student

use. Many were provided by Wayzata String Boosters and given to the District. A nominal rental was charged for the nine-month school year and for three-month summer use.

- No child was refused participation for inability to pay fees (String Boosters & PTA assisted).
- Touring Strings prepared Suzuki, popular, and classical repertoire and toured in the US and Canada. Participation was by audition. Rehearsal was after school.

1979 Snapshot

(From the program of a MMEA concert, Radisson Court, February 17, 1979)

There are six elementary schools in Wayzata District 284, and both the traditional and Suzuki methods of string instruction are offered. There are presently 150 stu-

dents enrolled in the Suzuki method under the direction of Helen Loing. Recruiting is not done, as there is such a demand for this type of instruction, and there is always a waiting list. According to the Suzuki philosophy, all children have ability and can develop their talent. For this reason, no pre-testing is done, and no child is discouraged or denied instruction as a result of a test score.

The Suzuki method in the Wayzata Public Schools may begin in kindergarten and continue through sixth grade. Beginners are accepted in any grade. Each student has a short individual lesson and a group practice in his or her school every week. There is also a district-wide “play through” at a central location. Music reading begins in third grade with group lessons. In grade four, the students continue their Suzuki-related activities in addition to joining the orchestra program under the direction of Barbara Lamb. There is also a Suzuki Chamber Orchestra, which meets occasionally. This is open to students in the intermediate grades.

A strong aspect of the Suzuki method is the total family commitment. A parent must attend the individual lesson and direct the daily practice at home. The parents provide transportation to many rehearsals, concerts, and “play-ins” and solo and ensemble programs throughout the year. These children reach out into the community and play in church orchestras, Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies, nursing homes and for civic functions.

1982 Snapshot

(Presented to the Wayzata School Board, 1982)

String Instruction is available to all

students in kindergarten through grade 12. There are no pre-requisites. Enrollment is approximately 370 students—275 elementary, 50 in junior high and 45 in senior high with full orchestra. Woodwinds, brass and percussion have been added to make a full secondary orchestra.

Students may choose to study violin, viola, and cello or string bass. Students have individual or small group lessons, large group playing experiences, note-reading



classes and exposure to classical orchestra and chamber music.

Very close parent-teacher relationships develop because of parent’s attendance at lessons in the elementary grades and because of frequent parent meetings and concerts.

Students have frequent district-wide musical activities including concerts, play-ins, music festivals and solo and ensemble programs.

The community benefits from this program because students share and demonstrate their skills by playing concerts in nursing homes, churches, and shopping

centers and for civic functions.

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Edwardsville. Lynn currently serves as Access Services Librarian at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

The Wayzata School Board eliminated the elementary string program in May 2001. Currently, strings are offered in grades 6–12. Kathryn Dressler has begun 3rd graders this year in an after school program through community ed. Hopefully the strong support for strings in the community and the documentation of the former program will help elementary strings to flourish again in the near future. [ed.] †