



# GUITAR

## The Orchestra Job You have Always Wanted Let's start talking about it with everyone

by Grant Wilcox

### Plant the seed

As any good parent, teacher or gardener knows, you can't simply scatter seeds or an idea and expect it to grow or happen. If we really want things to mature, it takes a lot of extra effort. We not only have to look for the signs of readiness, we have to create an environment that will promote readiness. When parents of young children ask, "How do I know when my child is ready to start the violin?" my reply always is, "Are you talking about it? And more important, is your child talking about playing the violin?"

Are we talking about our ideas and what we want, enough? Are we telling our administration what we envision and what we would like our program eventually to be like? Perhaps, most important, are we telling our parents, administrator and students why we want this change and what it will do for our community? I personally had to perform over and over again in every venue in my community and I started young children for years and had them play throughout our community before we had the need to start a string program in our schools. I presented the idea, created the environment and I looked for the slightest signs of readiness. As your program grows and each time a new aspect in your program needs to grow this process of creating the environment, looking for readiness and communication needs to be recycled.

### As teachers, maybe all we ever do is...sell ideas

As a teacher, all I ever do is sell ideas. For me this job is constant, like selling the idea to students of starting a string instrument, of daily practice, the need to add a second orchestra in our school day, to start a program where advanced high school students teach young children at low cost, having an orchestra room built on to our high school, adding additional professional string staff and adding my acoustic guitar program. My point is: are you talking about it? Are you talking about it with all of the stakeholders? Who are the stakeholders in your community?

### Set up meetings

In my first thirty plus years of teaching I always requested regular meetings with my building principals and the superintendent for that matter. I viewed these meetings as "fact finding missions" not only for me but also as opportunities for these people I worked for to learn about me and what I was hoping to accomplish. I not only wanted to get a sense of them but I wanted them to know that I was serious and was going to bring out the very best in my students. I also want to have them...as friends. To this day I consider my administration and past administrators friends I am comfortable calling anytime. Don't get me wrong; I do not always agree with these leaders but I respect them and they know I am comfortable questioning their thinking when it is important.

### In these meetings

These meetings were where I would ask them: what they liked about my program; if they had concerns; what they had heard from parents and what their vision was for our string program. Their response was always an invitation to interject my own vision. Some times I would only drop the seed and request them only to think about the idea for a while and we would talk later.

After 33 years of teaching strings—4 different superintendents, 11 principals, having gone from teaching in four different buildings each day to only one now—I still set up these meetings. I want them to keep thinking about me and our orchestra program. My last agenda will be to add a third orchestra in our high school schedule and to shape my orchestra position in advance as they seek a replacement as I retire from teaching in this community.

*Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: Chamber Orchestra, four sections of Classical Guitar I, two sections of Classical Guitar II, two sections of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra, Sinfonia Orchestra and independent study before and after school. His guitar ensemble performs between orchestras at each of his orchestra concerts. †*