



GUITAR

To Accelerate or to Retain Top String Students Beyond Pass/Fail

by Grant Wilcox

Throughout the many past decades in public schools the questions that seem to have the longest life are: Do we pass everyone no matter what? Do we ever fail? Or, under what circumstances do we accelerate young people ahead of peers to study at level? Who would ever think of leaving the math or science wiz in a class that was well behind them? Minnesota's top gymnastic teams are the strongest because they have nurtured their youth and had them perform at level since the moment they were ready. The entire AP Program is designed to place the high-flyer in a multi-age environment that is at an advanced level, in some cases beyond the collegiate level. The top ensemble in the music program is a basic example of the same concept. The answer to why we should accelerate our top students is simple: they belong and thrive in that enriched setting and will become the leaders tomorrow. The answer to why we do not accelerate more is not so clear and is based in fear of the unknown. Many think that the cost of removing the top students from the younger ensemble is bad for the younger group or conversely takes away an opportunity for some in the older group. These prejudices are false and help no one.

For every leader that leaves, another will come forward

The benefit of acceleration is: for the greater good

The benefit of acceleration is for the greater good on several levels. First: for the readiness and progress of the advanced student; second: for the advanced ensemble that mentors and develops leaders over time; and third: the benefit to the developing ensemble with the loss of the student who advances. The gain here is that every time a leader leaves another will appear. Over time, how many very strong world leaders have stepped up when needed, to take over as leaders? The romantics would say, "There is always a bud." In other words, no matter how harsh the winter, spring will bring new. Always when leadership leaves, new leadership will step forward to lead. The value of this transfer of leadership is great for each group but most important the value incentive to each individual in both groups has increased and not decreased. The only downside is the upper-class member who has the notion that leadership is simply a rite of passage. This situation is a great "teachable moment" about leadership and the greater good. Leadership is not a rite of passage. Leadership is a rare honor that is deserved and earned by outstanding skill and extra effort.

There is no magic

All musicians I know play better when they play with musicians with similar skill or with greater skill than they have. When musicians perform with others who struggle, they usually do not play their very best. In this respect, the student who is advancing will greatly benefit from the higher expectation and advanced mastery. On the other side the group that has been left will benefit from more appropriate music choice and the rise of effort that new leadership demands.

Arthur Rubenstein once responded to a question about why he

practiced so much in saying, "I wish to become superb." Psychologists studying students at the Music Academy of West Berlin found that the best musicians at age 18 had already spent 2,000 more hours in practice than the their fellow students. I am here to add that even hundreds of hours at level are much better than hours being held back or below level.

We accelerate our advanced string students

In our school district we accelerate advanced students in math, science, sports and...in orchestral music. For over 15 years as a string student meets or exceeds the standard to be in our top ensemble and requests to perform at that level, we allow them to accelerate to that level regardless of age. We allow this practice across buildings and across town for students in: science, math, sports and...in orchestral music, in many cases, to and from the different buildings. These busses have drivers around during the day anyway. In the case of orchestra, our top orchestra meets first hour so the parent simply brings their child to the high school to start the day and the district busses them to their home school near the end of our hour. This acceleration is only allowed within our string department; we allow only upper-class wind players to audition to play in our top orchestra. We have had requests for advanced younger wind players to accelerate into our top orchestra, but this is not possible for several reasons.

Pass... and has not passed yet

No student who is interested and tries can fail a string instrument. Most students who are interested in playing the string instrument of his or her choice can be successful. Some of our students will surprise us, some may disappoint their parents and some of our students will exceed our wildest expectation. I shall never have a "pass/fail" situation in string development. We have in our system what I like to refer to as a "Pass/Has Not Passed Yet" situation. The private student does not move on to the next piece until the piece is: in tune, has good tone, with correct timing and appropriate style. Until they are ready to move on to the next piece, they simply have not passed yet. We as teachers do not give up; we approach the piece differently and give it more time. If the student's peers are all playing "baby Bach" and he or she is moving on from the Haydn Violin Concerto, should we retain or accelerate the advanced student? In our school we do not retain them in the Bach Minuets with their peers; we accelerate them to study at level if that is the student's and parents' wish. Plus they can keep their old friends.

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: Chamber Orchestra, four sections of Classical Guitar I, two section 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 his orchestra concerts. Grant's ensembles have performed frequently at state and national conventions. ‡