



GUITAR

Adding a New Program

by Grant Wilcox

Starting an Orchestra, an Acoustic Guitar Program, or any new music class: they all require the same determination and thought process.

First Steps to Starting a New Program

The thoughts of your building principal are important when it comes to augmenting your program. It is the building principal who has the eyes and ears of the superintendent of schools, the school board and the community. Principals and the school superintendent meet on a regular basis. In our district they meet on a weekly schedule to discuss a variety of issues. If there is any praise or complaint about a program, it is the principal who hears the news first. These people do not keep secrets from each other and having one or more of them happy with your work sure is a great way to keep them all on your side. As I have prepared my building principal with the news of my retiring well over a year in advance, it is fun and interesting to listen to my administrator's affection for my orchestra program and to hear her view of the importance of our acoustic guitar program as a positive choice for more students. That new program took considerable effort to start.

Getting your Principal in your Corner

You cannot request too much communication with your principal. On the other hand you do not want them seeking you out but *you* want to seek them out. Ask their counsel, even when you may not need it. By this I mean: make them feel important; ask for their thoughts. Early on in your tenure ask them what they have heard about you and your program. Join the Site Base Committee, Climate Committee or the Curriculum Committee, or over the years serve on all of those groups at one time or another. The administrator will view you as an individual who not only is a teacher with a program but someone who cares about the school and the educational community. Let the principal see your car in the parking lot before he or she arrives at school in the morning and again when they leave to go home. Encourage and allow kids to be in your area all the time; create an environment that draws all kinds of students to "your space." At this point you may just have the administrator on your side and more important, in your corner.

Parents, Influential People and their Wishes for Students

Parents and young professionals are the next most important stakeholders and partners in building or re-inventing your program. Parents can help raise funds, influence change and carry a load you are not able or willing to handle. Become friends with young professionals and parents or at least help them become advocates

for your endeavors. Many years ago a surgeon and his wife with the guidance of a coach walked into a school board meeting dressed in their ski clothes, skis upon their shoulders with a simple message. The very next winter we had a cross-country ski team. Seek out the young professionals. When I had my first open meeting with our superintendent, almost 30 years ago, as a show of support in starting an orchestral program, we had the room full of young professionals. These influential people, guided by my vision and plan, made a huge impact and in part helped to start our current string program. I am friends with and thankful to this day for each of these people and their help.

Take the Next Step

The next step is yours and it is simply action. Do your homework, research your ideas, discover all the sides, build an argument and be ready to support what you believe. Put the important points in print so that others can review your ideas after you present your case. As you develop your new teaching concept and idea, run it by your building administrator before you consult your teaching peers. Your teaching peers maybe more concerned with turf protection and their program than with your vision and what you want to offer students. Your building principal will be interested in all students and what your school can become. After your building administrator is your advocate, then run the concept by your peers. If your principal is only lukewarm to the idea, your first task is to convince him or her, so just keep at it. When your principal is interested in your teaching model, your new program only needs to be printed in the next registration guide. This print deadline in most schools is after the Christmas Break. Take the steps, timing is everything and—you can do it. But remember...only you can do it.

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. Grant's ensembles have performed twice at the ASTA National Orchestra Festival, five times at MMEA State Conference, four times at the Tier II Festival in Orchestra Hall and at the MENC National Convention. †