

# ALL-STATE — GUITAR METHODS IN OUR SCHOOLS:

## Opening New Pathways for Musical Study

by Christopher Jannings, Ph.D

Christopher Jannings' All-State presentation on Thursday, August 4 focused on the following topics:

- Why consider a guitar program in your school?
- What do you need to get started?
- Logistical considerations
- Funding a guitar program
- Guitar Methods curriculum models

### Why consider a guitar program in your school?

Guitar programs give music educators an opportunity to reach a broader cross-section of students in their schools. Students of color, in particular, tend to be underrepresented in “traditional” ensemble-based music courses. Guitar programs are also a great outlet for “ensemble” students who are looking for more music instruction. In addition, a guitar program can bolster your registration numbers/increase staffing and give you a new challenge or a new way to invigorate your teaching.

### What do you need to get started?

On the most basic level, you will need a “classroom set” of guitars and cases. Decisions like nylon string acoustic guitars vs. steel string acoustic guitars and soft shell vs. hard shell cases are worthy of careful consideration and will be dependent on your own unique situation. Accessories like tuners, capos, etc. are nice, but not integral in guitar instruction (particularly to get a program started; they can be acquired as the program grows).

### Logistical considerations:

This can actually be one of the bigger challenges when developing a guitar program

(or making the commitment to do so). Where will you store the instruments? How will students be assigned instruments? Are students able to take the instruments home to practice? How will students be held responsible for damage? The storage issue can be particularly problematic as most of our classroom spaces were built for—and are currently occupied by—orchestras, bands, and choirs.

### Suggestions for funding:

So you are interested in starting a guitar program? It takes some money to get it off the ground! Plan on at least \$150–200 per guitar and \$50–75 per case. Consider lobbying with your school and district administration for the funding. While it is not a small amount of money, it is typically not a prohibitive amount. Proposing the establishment of a guitar program as a matter of equity and access to music can also go a long way in gaining district support for funding. While not as prevalent as they once were, there are still a number of grants available specifically for starting guitar programs in our schools. These are generally sponsored by music retail organizations like NAMM, Fender, D’Addario, etc.

### Guitar Methods curriculum models:

At the most basic level, there are three curriculum models or tracks to consider:

#### “Method Book”

- Sequential methodology
- Prioritizes melodic playing
- Focus on traditional note reading

#### “Play Along”

- Less rigid sequence (somewhat “scatter shot”)

- Prioritizes chord playing and playing along with recordings
- Focus on tablature reading

#### “Hybrid”

- Blend of the two main curriculum designs

Each model has positives and negatives. Consider, however, what the students in your class want to learn. The problem with a “method book” model, for example, is relevance. While this model might align more closely with what we know as string teachers, this is the least likely to receive widespread student buy-in. Students are most interested in learning how to play chords so they can play along with recordings or sing and play with friends. That said, if you are ambitious and looking to start a more robust guitar program with multi-part guitar ensembles, the more traditional “method book” approach might be the better way to go. Rather than adopting one rigid model, consider the “hybrid” approach and think of your curriculum on a continuum that is flexible and can change with your experience and feedback from students.

*Music educator, clinician, and conductor Christopher Jannings serves MNSOTA’s Board as President. He is currently the Director of Orchestras and Guitar Studies at Roseville Area High School. Christopher currently serves on the editorial board of American String Teacher, the national peer-reviewed journal of the American String Teachers Association. As a freelance musician, he has performed in a number of styles and venues on string bass, electric bass, cello, and guitar across the Upper Midwest.*