

## MAKING THE CLASSROOM A MORE MUSICAL PLACE

Are you considering bringing more musical education to your school? Are you looking for the most practical, cost-effective, fun and inclusive way to teach your students to play music? If so, you're in the right place. In this article, we'll discuss the benefits for students, teachers and administrators of adding a guitar class into your school's program offerings, so you can successfully pitch the idea and get it up and running in no time.

## WHY GUITAR?

With so many instruments out there, you may be wondering what makes the guitar stand out from the rest. Or maybe you're already sold on the idea, but need some help convincing decision-makers at your school. While there are dozens of excellent reasons to introduce a guitar program into your school curriculum, here are a few of the most compelling:

**COST** Compared to starting a band or orchestra, the costs of a guitar class are exceptionally low. For the same price your school would pay for a single tuba (\$3000 or more), you can buy guitars for at least 25 students. And when everyone's playing the same instrument, a single instructor can teach a whole class without the help of assistants or other teachers.

**VERSATILITY** The recorder is a great first instrument for children, but the skill cap is quite low and the style and repertoire options are limited. With the guitar, you can start off easy and there's virtually no limit to how technical a player can become. And from pop to blues, folk, rock, flamenco and more, there are tunes every student will enjoy playing.

**ACCESSIBILITY** Whether it's because it's cool or simply less intimidating than picking up an oboe or violin, students love the guitar. Finding recruits for a guitar lab is a lot easier than finding players for the school band, and you'll be exposing students to the art who may never have been attracted to musical education before.

**HISTORY** A guitar class is an excellent way to open the door to music history. This centuries-old instrument crosses culture and time barriers and is an easy way to start conversations about music in a historical context.

**TEAMWORK** Many students will form groups to practice and discuss guitar assignments, leading to increased engagement, group work and, sometimes, after-school bands.

## FUNDING YOUR PROGRAM

Even with its relatively inexpensive price tag, a guitar lab's money still needs to come from somewhere. Luckily, a number of grant programs and crowdfunding options are already in place to make fundraising a little easier for your school. Check out our educator capabilities page for info on Grants and other resources.

## THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

**EQUIPMENT** While starting and maintaining a guitar class is a less demanding undertaking than a band or orchestra, there are still a number of items you'll need to make sure your class runs as smoothly as possible. The necessities include:

- 1) A full-size, nylon-string guitar for every student (nylon strings are gentler on beginners' fingers, easier to repair and break less often than steel strings)
- 2) A chair for every student
- 3) A music stand for every student
- 4) A guitar case for every student
- 5) Electronic tuners, ideally for every student
- 4) A year's worth of replacement strings (some music dealers will sell you strings in bulk):
  - 2-3 dozen 1st strings
  - 2-3 dozen 2nd strings
  - 2 dozen 3rd strings
  - 4 dozen 4th strings
  - 2-3 dozen 5th strings
  - 2-3 dozen 6th strings
- 5) Select tools:
  - Flat screwdrivers
  - Phillips screwdrivers
  - Regular pliers
  - Long-nose pliers
  - Allen wrenches
  - Crescent wrenches
  - Hammer
  - Different sizes of nails
  - Nail clippers
  - Nail file
- 6) Plastic bridges for classical guitars
- 7) Replacement machine head sets
- 8) A guitar book or sheet music for each student
- 9) A large assortment of picks
- 10) Storage lockers or instrument racks
- 11) Manuscript paper

On top of these essentials, there are a few bonus items that can make life easier for both yourself and your students, including:

- A strap for each student
- A capo for each student
- An electric drill with a Turbo Tuner bit or an automatic winder for replacing strings
- An electric drum machine or metronome
- A CD player or mp3 player
- A scratch guard for each guitar to keep them in better shape for longer
- Individual guitar stands for each student to minimize damage to instruments
- A riser so you can be seen demonstrating proper technique
- A foot stool for every student

## LET'S GET TEACHING

**SKILLS** Whether you're an accomplished music teacher or are just picking up an instrument for the first time, there are a number of musical and other skills the teacher of any guitar class should have before the beginning of the semester.

*Musically, you should be able to:*

- 1) Play the 18 notes in first position with correct fingerings
- 2) Demonstrate good left and right hand technique, with and without a pick
- 3) Model good posture and hand positions

*Technically, you should know how to:*

- 1) Tune a guitar
- 2) Change a guitar string
- 3) Perform minor repairs, such as straightening a neck, replacing a nut or saddle and replacing machine heads

*You will also need to:*

- 1) Possess strong classroom management and organizational skills
- 2) Be able to write and follow weekly lesson plans
- 3) Keep a class handbook with student expectations and consequences for not meeting them
- 4) Always prepare material to stay a few lessons ahead
- 5) Structure every lesson in the same way, with a beginning, middle and end that includes a warm-up, a review, a new lesson and a closing activity

**STARTING SUGGESTIONS** If you've never taught a guitar class before, you may be wondering where to start. And, while your students will be keen to begin playing right away, there is some housekeeping that needs to be done first to set your class up for a successful semester. In addition to all your standard classroom procedures, like seating plans and policies for absenteeism, bathroom breaks and electronic devices, you should also implement some specific guidelines for the guitar class:

- 1) Go over classroom procedures, being sure to answer the following questions:
  - Are your consequences for bringing gum, food and drinks to class be stronger than other classes due to the consequences for instrument damage?
  - What happens if a student forgets their music book or guitar at home? Are there spares?
  - What is the proper way to store and care for a guitar?
  - What happens when a string breaks?
  - What are the students to do with their guitars while instructions are being given? What are the consequences for students who don't follow the procedure?
- 2) Have each student complete a Guitar Usage Agreement form that answers the questions:
  - Does each student have an individual guitar, or can they grab and play any instrument?
  - Are students responsible for reporting damages to the guitars?
  - What are the consequences when a guitar is damaged?
  - Are students allowed to take guitars home?
- 3) Do pre-testing to determine what knowledge and skills students already have to better gauge their progress.
- 4) Describe what material the semester will cover and how the grades will be determined.

## THE MORE, THE MERRIER

While many early exercises are written for solo guitar, never underestimate the power of ensemble playing. Introducing your students to making music with their peers can teach many skills, both musical and social, that solo playing cannot. Some crucial skills that can be developed and strengthened through group practice and performance include:

### WORKING TOGETHER

Every teacher knows the importance of helping students develop teamwork skills. Peer cooperation is a necessary life skill and can increase engagement and help form friendship bonds.

### HEALTHY COMPETITION

Ensemble playing can also increase motivation through competition for major parts and can even lead to school or district-wide ensemble contests.

### PERFORMING

Many beginning guitarists will not yet be confident enough with their skills for solo performances, but group performances can be a great intermediate step. Talent shows, competitions and other events can be invaluable tools for building confidence.

### INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

In group compositions, there are usually lead and supportive lines. No matter each student's skill level, there are roles for everyone.

### FOLLOWING THE LEADER

Both patience and attentiveness are necessary skills when following a group's conductor. Whether or not a student continues with their musical practice after leaving guitar lab, knowing how to follow directions will come in handy to that student in the future.

### KEEPING TIME

Each member of an ensemble is responsible for counting out the beat of their own part, and playing among others with different rhythms and notes requires practice and engagement.

### MUSICALITY

From dynamic expression and balance to articulation and more, making music with a group is an ideal way to learn a number of important skills that anyone interested in continuing with music will need.

## LOW RISK, HIGH REWARD

A guitar lab is a practical and fun way to bring variety to your curriculum. From every perspective, introducing a guitar program at your school will be a rewarding experience for teachers and students alike. Exposing young people to the joys of music is always a noble purpose, and teaching students to be lifelong music-makers is something they're bound to thank you for.