

The Picture Brightens (Slightly) for String Programs

New study finds more districts offering instruction and greater ethnic diversity among students ■ BY CATHY APPLEFELD OLSON

It may not be the best of times for our schools' string and orchestra programs, but things certainly are looking up. A recent report cites numerous positives, including an increase in the number of districts offering strings classes, a greater variety in the racial mix of strings students, and a less drastic dearth of certified teachers than existed seven years ago.

The new report, "The Status of Strings and Orchestra Programs in United States Schools," includes responses from 794 string and orchestra teachers in 2009. The study determined that the profession would need an influx of 3,000 teachers between 2010 and 2013. This compares with a similar 2002 study that found a national shortage of 5,000 teachers over a five-year period.

"There's still a need for teachers, it's just not quite as steep," says Michael Alexander, associate professor of music education at Baylor University, who co-authored the new research with Bret Smith, associate professor of music education at Central Washington University.

Alexander says the findings suggest that advocacy efforts such as the National String Project Consortium, established in 1999, are actually working. But other factors may be at play, he cautions: "What we're seeing is people retiring later and later, and it could be simply that between 2002 and '09 very few

people retired, so positions that were forecast as being open are not open yet."

The report also shows growth in the number of school districts offering string instruction. The percentage increased from 18% of districts in 1997 to 29% in 2009. Additionally, the racial composition of strings students has morphed since 2002 to the point where classes roughly reflect the general population. The percentage of white students has gone down by more than 15%, while there were upticks in the Hispanic, Asian, and other demographics (see chart).

"What these numbers represent is not a decrease in white participation but an increase in minority participation," Alexander explains. Yet the strings and orchestra teaching population remains stagnant at about 92% white, which does not fit with

current demographic trends. Among other findings:

- The number of students playing stringed instruments in schools has steadily increased at all grade levels since the early 1980s.

- The average years of experience for strings teachers increased from 10-plus in 1998 to 19 in 2009.

- 70% of strings teachers play a stringed instrument as their primary instrument.

Also of interest was this statistic: Only 53% of respondents said that a printed curriculum was available and used to plan instruction. "So what are the others teaching from?" Alexander wonders. "Having a curriculum in place gives us a goal. I cannot tell you how much I reinforce with my teachers that standards are the minimum goals you have to strive for." ❧

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STRING STUDY AND ETHNICITY	PERCENTAGE OF STRING STUDENTS IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS		PERCENTAGE OF U.S. POPULATION (based on the 2000 U.S. Census)
	2002 (920 schools surveyed)	2009 (794 schools surveyed)	
White, Non-Hispanic	72%	56.6%	75.1%
Hispanic	9%	13.3%	12.5%
Black, Non-Hispanic	10%	10.6%	12.3%
Asian	7.5%	9.8%	3.7%
American Indian	0.5%	1.3%	0.9%

SOURCE: "THE STATUS OF STRINGS AND ORCHESTRA PROGRAMS IN UNITED STATES SCHOOLS," A WHITE PAPER DISTRIBUTED BY THE NATIONAL STRING PROJECT CONSORTIUM (STRINGPROJECTS.ORG); ILLUSTRATION: THINKSTOCK/ISTOCKPHOTO